Walter Moers

The Book Dragon

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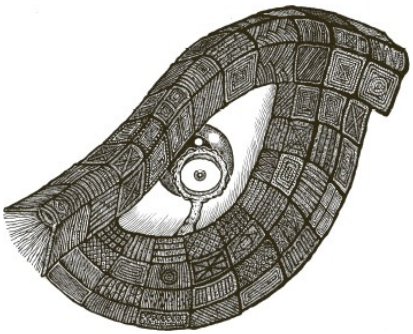

A novel from Zamonia by

Hildegunst von Mythenmetz

Translated from Zamonian
and illustrated by

Walter Moers

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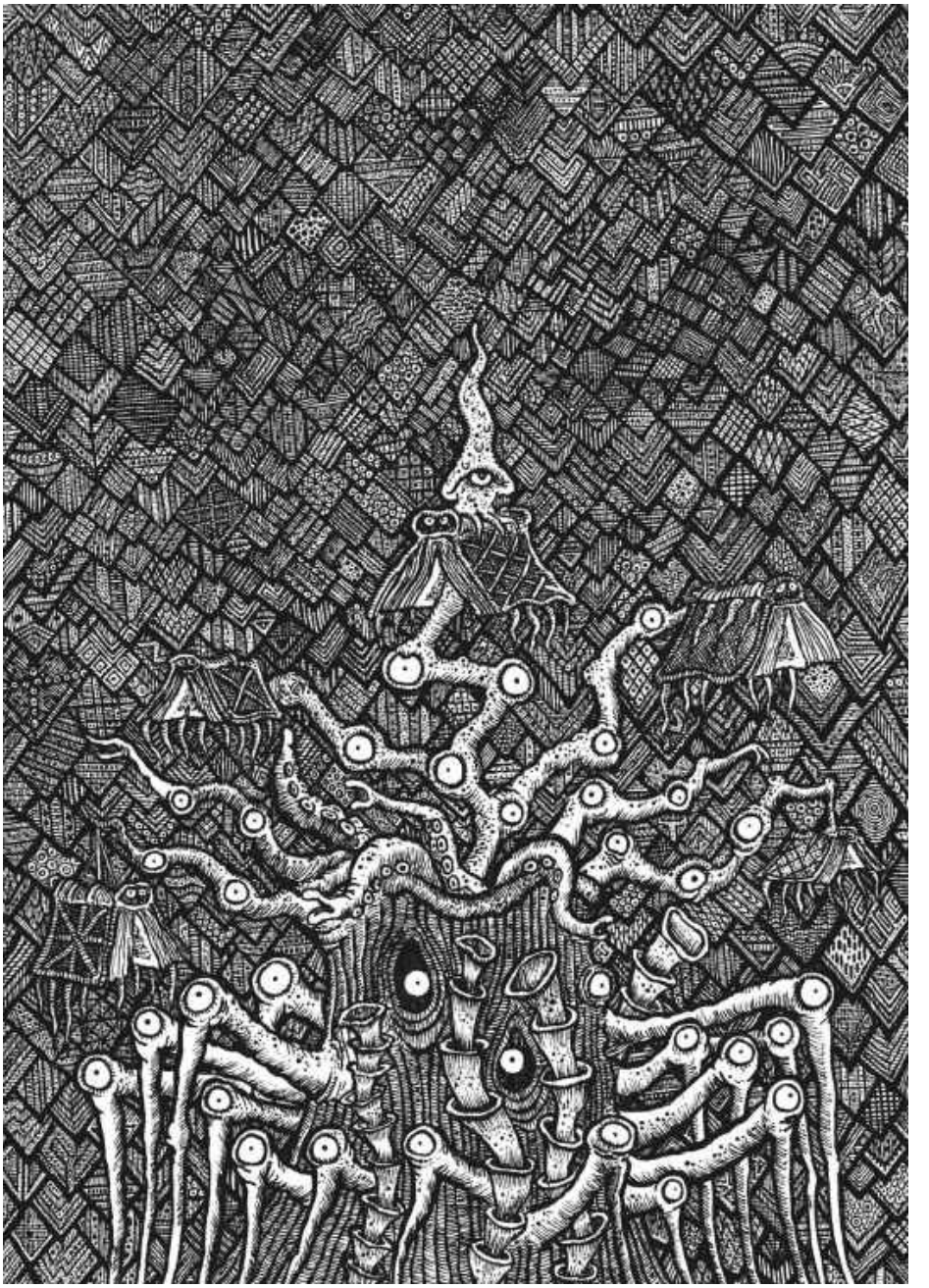
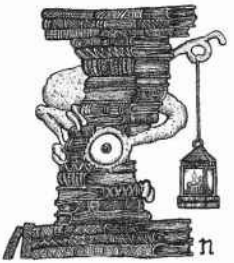
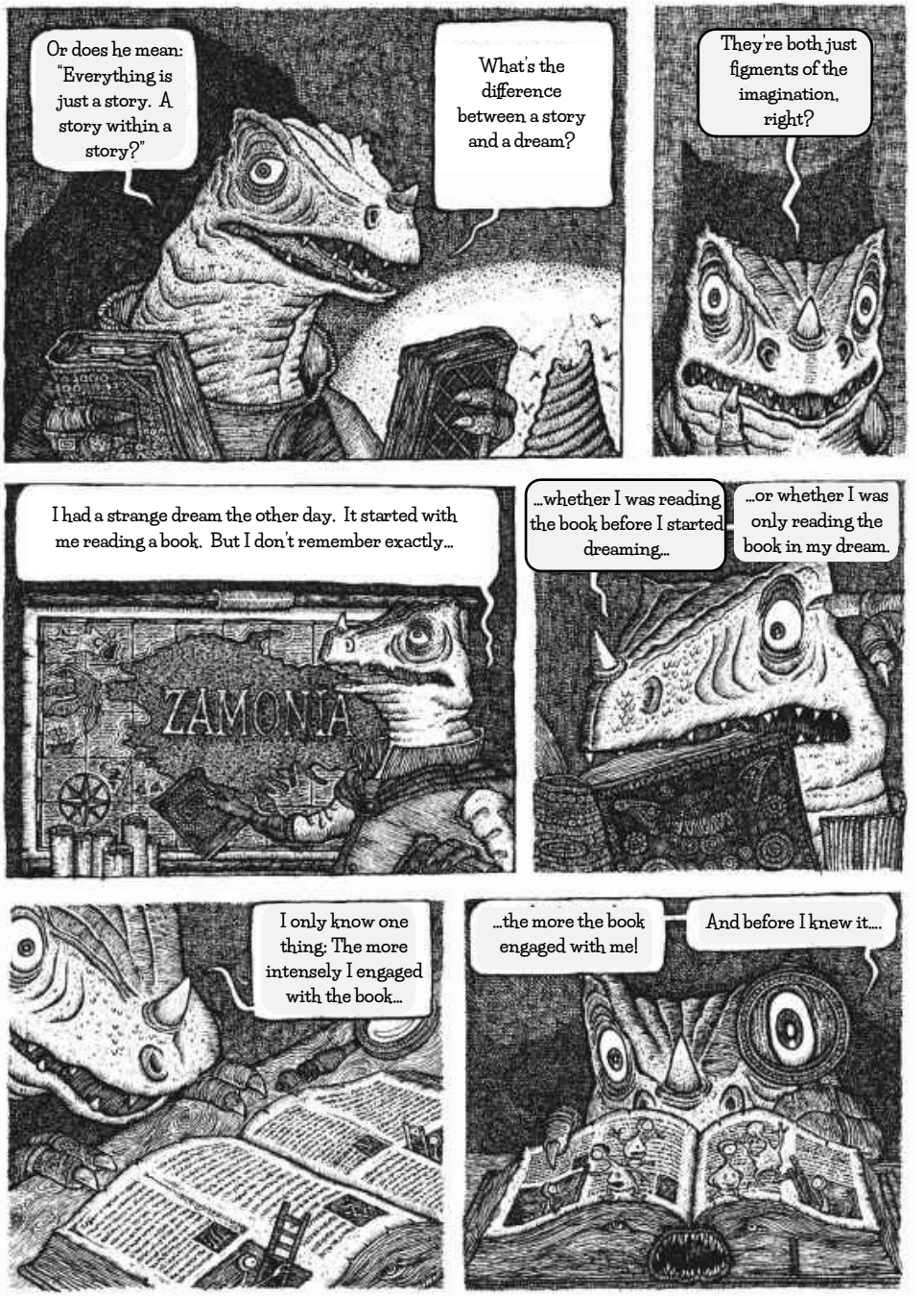


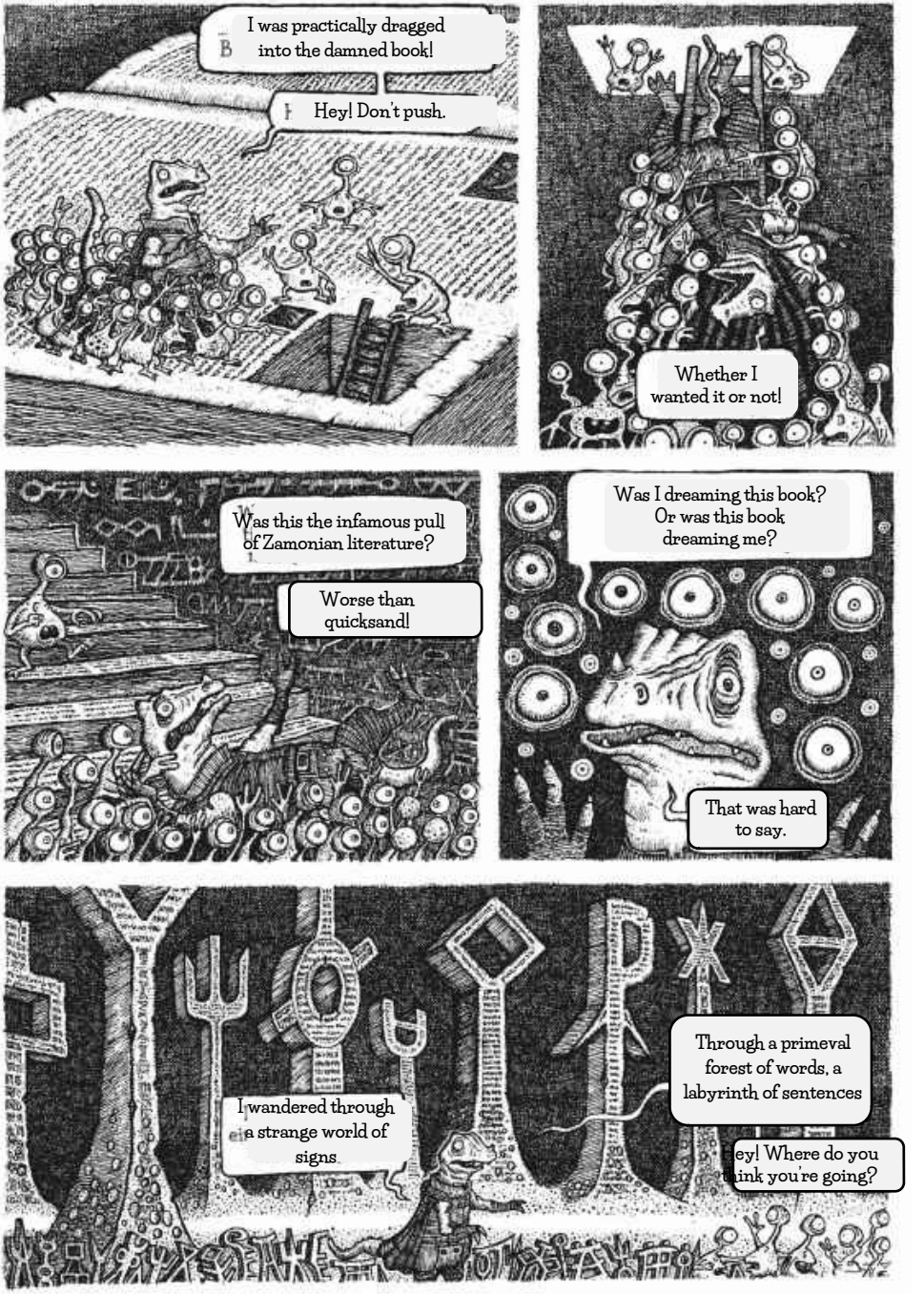


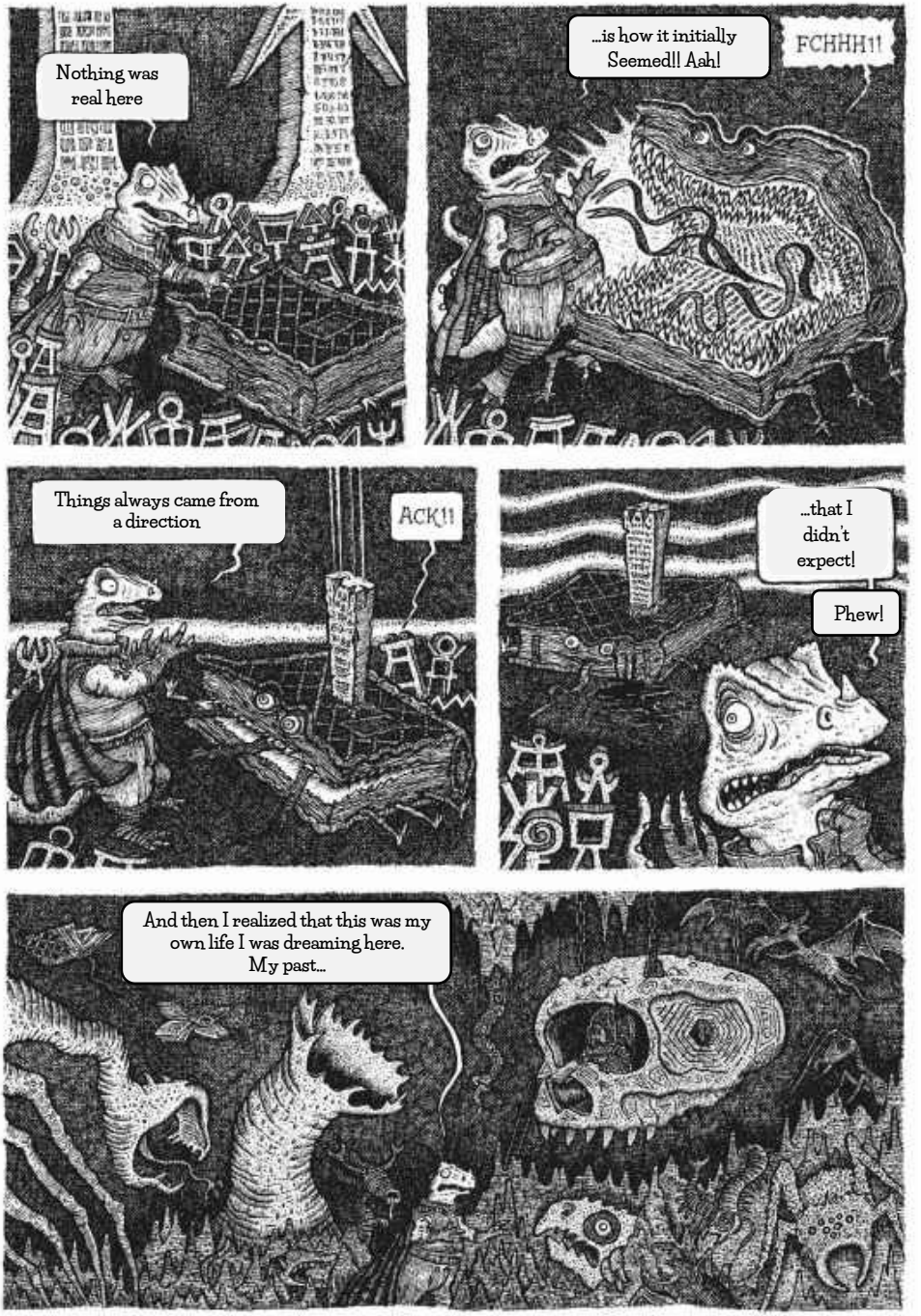
evil, dark, and icy pools,
Where old books full of the Orm
Are dangling deep in dead swamps—
Where bookworms swarm—
Where all questions find an answer
Though no one knows their question—
There that demon is said to writhe,
The one they call the **Book Dragon**

Ojahnn Golgo van Fontheweg
"The Orm Swamp"

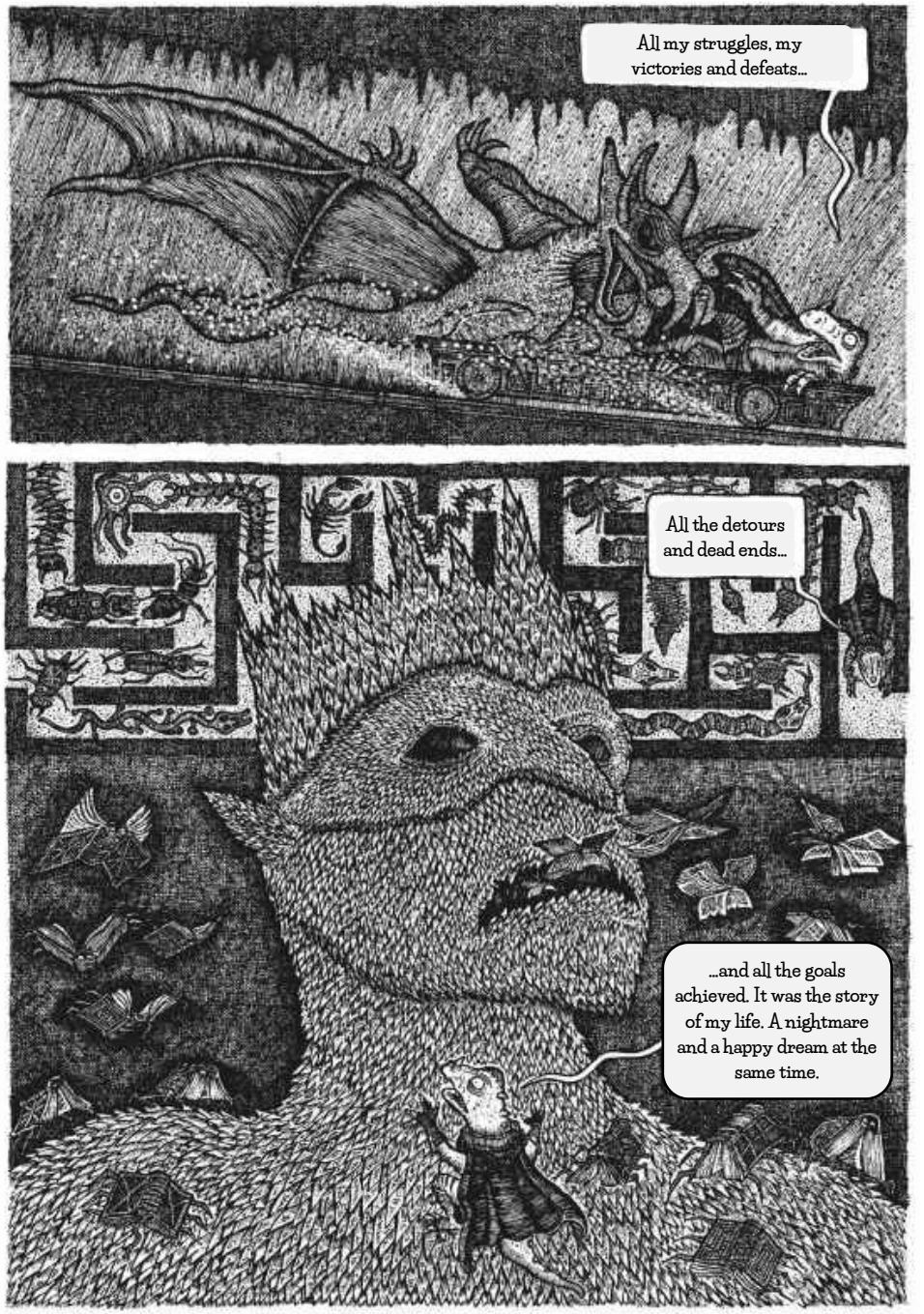
Thus writes Perla la Gadeon in one of his poems.
All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream." Well...
Hildegunst von Mythenmetz

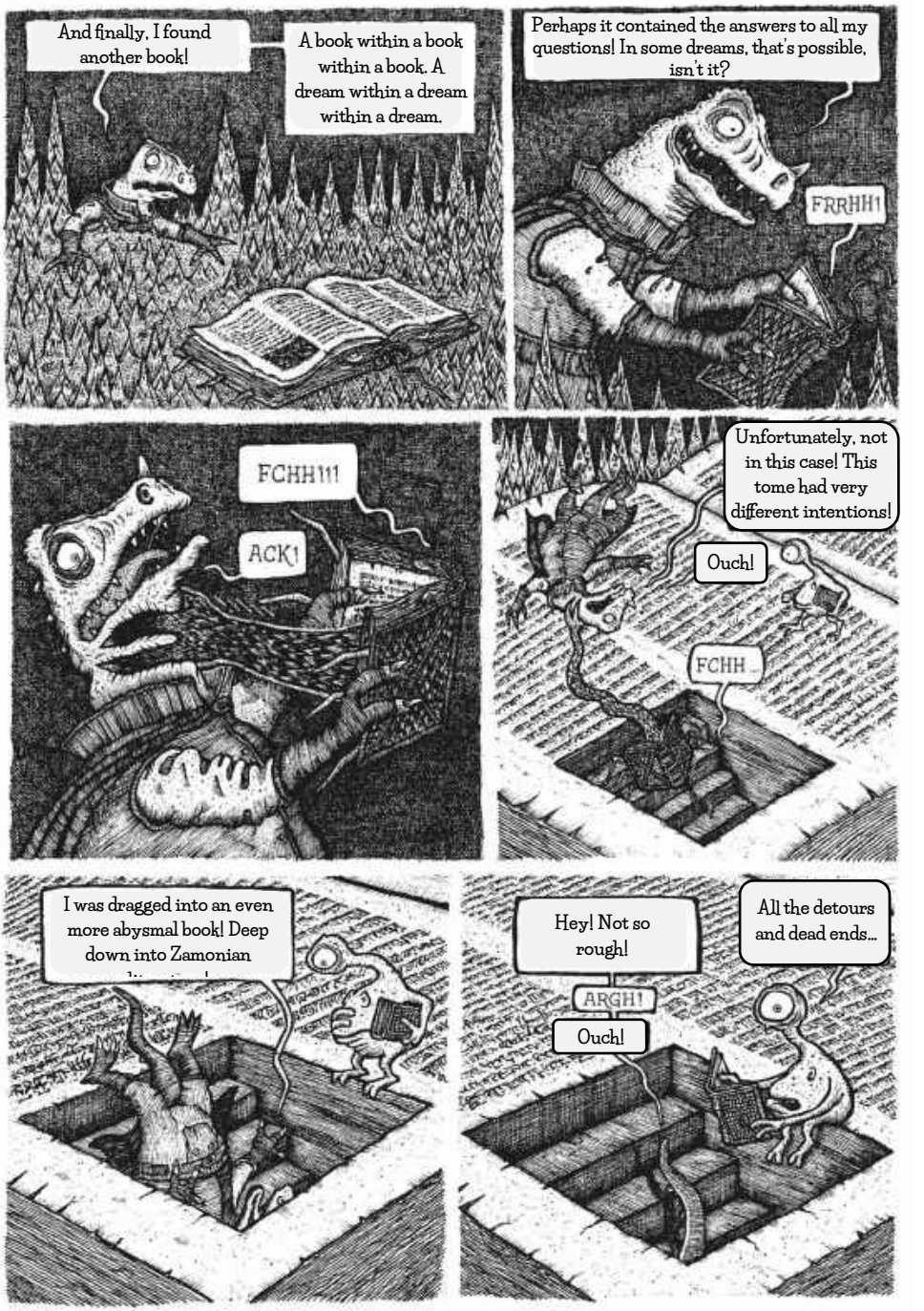

Or does he mean: "Everything is just a story. A story within a story?"
What's the difference between a story and a dream?
They're both just figments of the imagination, right?
I had a strange dream the other day. It started with me reading a book. But I don't remember exactly...
ZAMONIA
...whether I was reading the book before I started dreaming...
...or whether I was only reading the book in my dream.
I only know one thing: The more intensely I engaged with the book...
...the more the book engaged with me!
And before I knew it....


I was practically dragged into the damned book!
Hey! Don't push.
Whether I wanted it or not!
Was this the infamous pull of Zamonian literature?
Worse than quicksand!
Was I dreaming this book? Or was this book dreaming me?
That was hard to say.
I wandered through a strange world of signs.
Through a primeval forest of words, a labyrinth of sentences
Hey! Where do you think you're going?


Nothing was real here
...is how it initially Seemed!! Aah!
FCHHH!!
Things always came from a direction
ACK!!
...that I didn't expect!
Phew!
And then I realized that this was my own life I was dreaming here. My past...

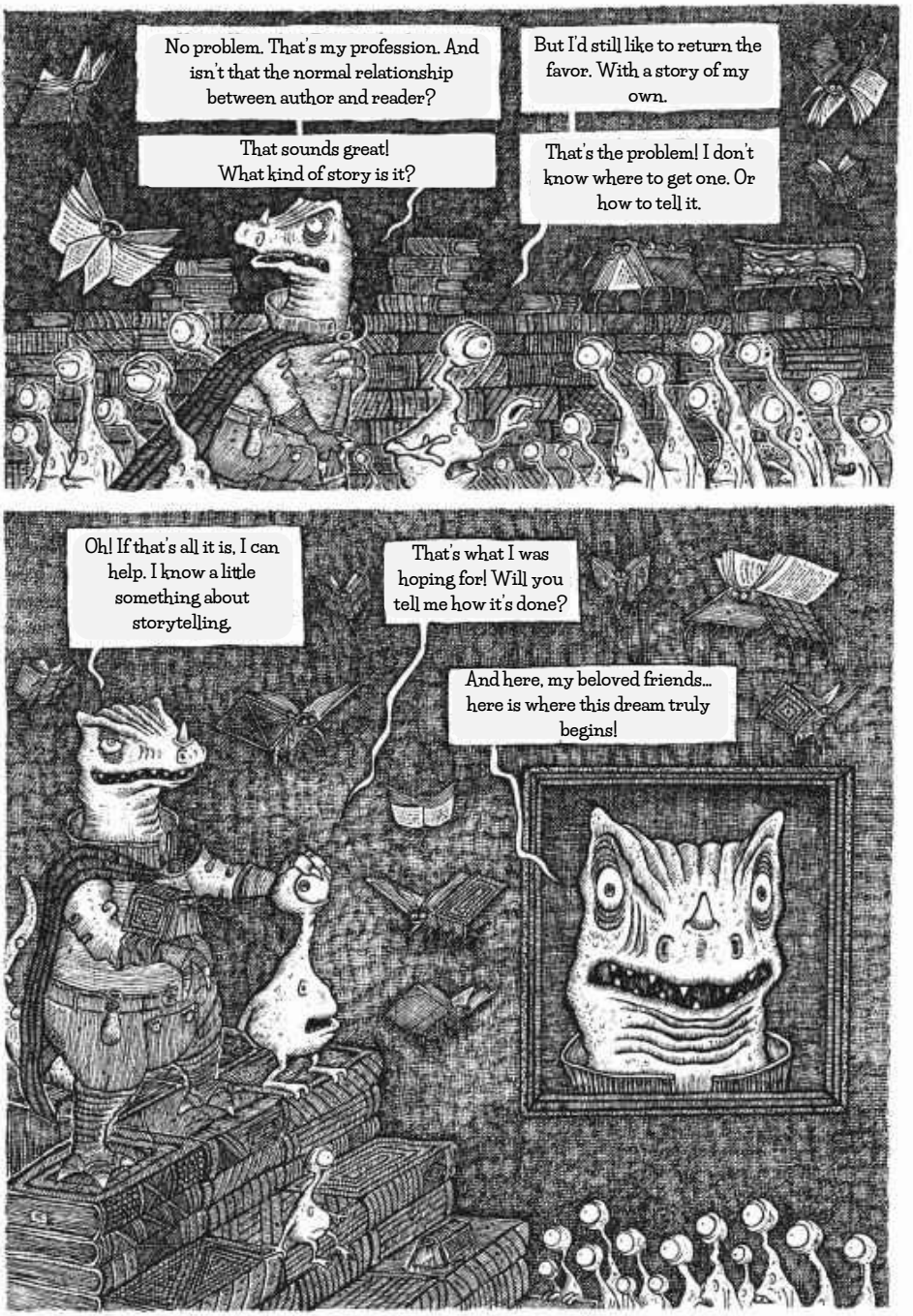
...but also my future!
With all its highs and lows...
...and all the adventures I have already experienced or will yet experience
All my past and future journeys!


All my struggles, my victories and defeats...
All the detours and dead ends...
...and all the goals achieved. It was the story of my life. A nightmare and a happy dream at the same time.


And finally, I found another book!
A book within a book within a book. A dream within a dream within a dream.
Perhaps it contained the answers to all my questions! In some dreams, that's possible, isn't it?
FRRHH!
FCHH!!!
ACK!
Unfortunately, not in this case! This tome had very different intentions!
Ouch!
FCHH
I was dragged into an even more abysmal book! Deep down into Zamonian
Hey! Not so rough!
ARGH!
Ouch!
All the detours and dead ends...

All of this seemed strange and yet strangely familiar
FCHH!!
Chrr ...
And then I met myself! Well, that's not unusual in a dream, is it?
Except that though the thing that stepped out from the mirror bore my name but wasn't me! Does that sound crazy enough? It was Hildegunst Two, the bookling who is memorizing my entire works!
I had met him once before, ages ago in the catacombs of Bookholm.
No need to worry! Such things happen frequently in dreams
I've been waiting for you for a long time.

You were expecting me? That's so sweet! What did I do to deserve this honor?
The honor is all mine! I owe you a huge debt.
Just follow me.
Isn't walking through a mirror a bit of a cliché these days? Are we even allowed to do that anymore?
In dreams, anything is allowed!
Aha, so this is one of those dreams where you know you're dreaming? Those are the best! You were actually expecting me?
Yes! I always wished we could meet again.
You actually think you owe me something?
I memorized all your books. You gave me all your thoughts. And I was never able to give you anything in return.


No problem. That's my profession. And isn't that the normal relationship between author and reader?
But I'd still like to return the favor. With a story of my own.
That sounds great! What kind of story is it?
That's the problem! I don't know where to get one. Or how to tell it.
Oh! If that's all it is, I can help. I know a little something about storytelling.
That's what I was hoping for! Will you tell me how it's done?
And here, my beloved friends... here is where this dream truly begins!

One Myth and Six Classics

"asily. Just tell me about something you've experienced," I urged him. "A story from your life."

"A story from my life?" Hildegunst Two[1] looked at me, puzzled. "But I haven't done anything. At all. I'm a bookling. We read. We sleep and dream. Booklings don't have exciting lives."

"Come on!" I said, trying to cheer him up. "Everyone's done or experienced something. You live in the catacombs. You mine for diamonds. You search for rare books. You even venture outside the Leather Grotto. Think hard! Something extraordinary must have happened to you. Some exciting situation. A time you encountered dangerous creatures. Murderous bookhunters. Ravenous harpies. Giant insects with evil intentions. Something."

Hildegunst Two thought hard. Then an idea seemed to occur to him. "So...well...there was this time with Nathaviel."

"Nathaviel?"

"Yes. The Orm Dragon. Or the Book Dragon. Nathaviel, that is. He

[1] English Translation: Also known as Optimus Two. Hildegunst von Mythenmetz's name has been variously translated as Optimus Yarnspinner, Hildegard Mythmaker, and Wilfried the Wordsmith. I have retained the original.

has many names. So, that was quite..." He paused.

"The story of the Book Dragon doesn't count," I said, waiving my hand dismissively. "That's just a myth, and one I've heard many times before. Instead of retelling a made-up story, tell me something that actually happened to you."

"This isn't a made-up story. It's true."

I tilted my head, intent. "Really? Well, let's hear it then!"

"Um..." said Hildegunst Two. He rubbed a finger under his lower lip, as the booklings do when deep in thought. "It was...well. It actually started in school."

"You have school down here?"

"Sure. The old teach the young. Don't you go to school on the surface?"

"Yes, we do. Although, I mainly had private lessons with my poetry mentor, Dancelot Wordwright. He..." I interrupted myself. "Never mind. Moving on."

"It's not that we get much instruction," Hildegunst Two explained, "Just the bare essentials: writing, reading, counting. And grammar. Ancient languages. Applied antiquarianism. Book printing. Typography. Also, catacombs mythology—what you'd probably call history class, except it's less of an exact science. It's learning about legends, fairy tales, myths, campfire stories—that sort of thing. Anyway, my story begins in a catacombs mythology lesson. The teacher told us the myth of Nathaviel, the Book Dragon."

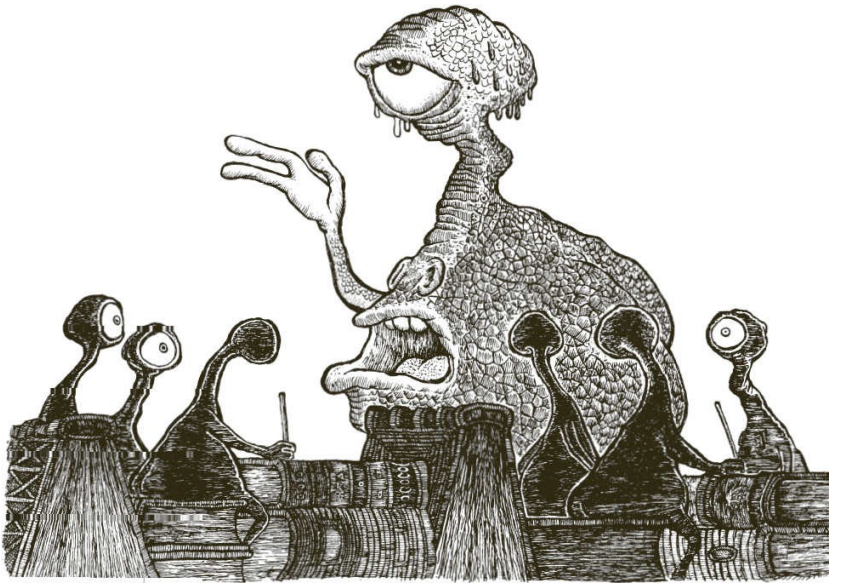
"So it is indeed a myth."

Hildegunst Two looked at me sullenly. "Yes, yes...but the myth part is only the beginning of the story. The rest really happened to me."

"Excuse me. Just go ahead!"

"Thank you. Now, the teacher told us the story of a giant bookworm that lives deep down in the Orm Swamp. That's where the really old, especially valuable books of the catacombs rot."

The Orm Swamp. I had read about it in Colophonius Regenschein's book, *The Catacombs of Bookholm*. If I remembered correctly, Regenschein described the place as "mythical"—as a fictional, romanticized counterpart to the real-life Unholm landfill, where mostly worthless books rot. I knew that landfill really existed, because I had been there. But the Orm Swamp seemed to me a typical bookhunter's fairy tale: a fevered dream like ivory dealers have about elephant graveyards; a figment of the imagination, born of an insatiable greed for ever rarer and more precious books. The Orm Swamp was surely the catacombs version of the well-known legend of the overflowing treasury, where all sorts of treasures lie in a gigantic heap, freely available to lazy and lawless individuals. I also remembered that the Orm Swamp was supposed to be an almost completely dried-up offshoot of the subterranean river Magmass, consisting of a tangle of branches and canals. This was at least a pseudoscientific explanation for all the Orm-saturated books that were supposedly piled up there. After all, the Magmass does



transport vast quantities of rotting books along with all sorts of other things. I had seen this with my own eyes during a walk with the uggly Inazea Anazazi, when she showed me the spot where the Magmass erupts in the middle of Bookholm.

"And all of those books are even older and more valuable than the ones on the Golden List," Hildegunst Two chattered on. "They're works by writers from a bygone era when all artists were still imbued with the Orm."

Another myth: the time when all artists were filled with Orm—without exception. An era when a master singer stood on every corner, one who was not only a virtuoso with voice and lute, but also a reciter of texts and compositions of otherworldly quality. An era when every oil painting was a masterpiece, every poem an enlightenment, and every novel a revelation. A nostalgic "everything was better in the old days" myth, almost touching in its naive sincerity. And of course, the books of all the writers of this "golden age" were now lost or gathered in the Orm Swamp.

I nodded. "I've heard about that," I said, smiling gently and suppressing a snide remark.

"The teacher told us that the Book Dragon was typically called *Nathaviel,* although he might—depending on the legend—be referred to as *Elivathan, Thanaviel, Levanthia,* or *Ilathevan.* Since time immemorial, he's been wallowing in this book swamp. Because that's what legendary dragons do, isn't it? They wallow in treasures...when they're not devouring maidens." Hildegunst Two grinned. "Which, in Nathaviel's case, led to these Orm-saturated books becoming embedded in his skin over time, growing there until almost his scale armor consisted of embedded tomes. That's why he's also called the *Orm Dragon,* right?"

"Yes, I get it," I replied; "a library of the Orm on four legs with a head and a tail. Very metaphorical."

"We used to have pictures of him in our Leather Grotto," Hilde-

gunst Two said, nodding in acknowledgement. "On mosaics and blankets. Before the bookhunters came and destroyed everything. You should still have seen them."

"That's right," I replied. "I vaguely remember them—murals and such."

"Well," the little bookling continued, "this constant immersion in Orm-infused literature transformed Nathaviel over time into the cleverest creature in the catacombs—or so the myth claimed. The Orm penetrated his every pore, his bloodstream, his enormous heart, and finally his brain, which was thereby completely—how should I put it?—transformed, you understand?"

"Rewritten?"

"Exactly. He became incredibly clever. Super inspired. Extraordinarily creative. Kissed by all the muses. He even spoke like a book on command. He could even speak in rhyme, in any meter imaginable, and he had an answer to every single question—absolutely every single one! Exhaustively, definitively, and with such flawlessly formulated answers that his words could have been carved in stone without any editing."

"So, an oracle," I said—"a popular subject for myths. When will we get to the real story?"

"Just wait and see! The teacher then explained to us that the dragon was actually a symbol, a metaphor for the desire for boundless knowledge—and for the age-old dream of acquiring this knowledge effortlessly. After all, Nathaviel didn't have to painstakingly read and understand the books to absorb their contents. Nope! Not him! He just had to bathe in them all day. Or sleep in them at night. Or roll around in them like a pig in mud.

"Naturally, this story went down quite well with us young booklings. It was the lazy student's dream: while others toil away and cram like crazy, the clever dragon simply rolls around in a pile of old tomes. And not only does he acquire an invaluable armor made

of books from the Golden List. Oh no! He even becomes the most nutrient-satisfied creature in the catacombs. Just like that! It was easy to fantasize about the same thing happening to us. Even the story of the Shadow King paled in comparison."

I shuddered, for the mere mention of the Shadow King aroused intense feelings in me.

"Furthermore, our teacher emphasized," Hildegunst Two continued, "that Nathaviel was an extremely unusual dragon: a good one! Not some treacherous, smooth-talking dragon you can't turn your back on like the creatures in most legends, but a compassionate, peaceful, and rational being, good-natured and kind. His regular immersion in books had given him a comprehensive education in philosophy and literature. He was well-versed in law, scientifically astute, wise, and just, capable of moral insights and their necessary conclusions. And so on—all things not usually attributed to dragons. True, sometimes his pronouncements were nebulous and cryptic. But that's what's expected of oracles, isn't it? A plain-speaking oracle is a contradiction in terms.

"In ancient times, inhabitants from every corner of the catacombs flocked to Nathaviel to ask him their burning questions. Powerful book princes, poets, philosophers, and scholars all sought his advice: Where should we hide our book treasures, Thanaviel? How does one obtain the Orm, Elivathan? How does one translate from ancient Florinthian, Ilathevan? He is also said to have accurately predicted the course of military conflicts and such. He warned of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, supposedly down to the hour. He settled tribal feuds with wise counsel. He ended border wars that had simmered for generations by suggesting the simplest of solutions. And so on. A top-notch dragon, then! Nathaviel, Elivathan, Thanaviel, Levanthia, or Ilathevan—choose your favorite name! I think Nathaviel is the best. Finally, the teacher gave us the homework of coming up with a good question for the Book Dragon."

"A truly original idea for a teacher," I interjected.

"Indeed," said Hildegunst Two, sighing. "And fatefully so. Because that's how it all began...."

The question [Hildegunst Two said] about what to ask the Book Dragon really got me thinking. When the lesson was over, I amused myself with a few other students hanging around near the classrooms. You have to understand, I was the youngest in the class, so I always followed the bigger kids and joined in on whatever they were doing. Mostly mischief, as you can probably guess. I was part of a gang of six hooligans of the worst kind. Their names were Estrakos, Arkaneon, Eliastrotes, Eideprius, Steraphasion, and Klosophes,[2] or Estra, Arka, Elias, Eidep, Steraph, and Kloso for short. The other students referred to them as "the Classics" or "the Classics Gang," for they all bore the names of poets from Zamonia's classical antiquity—which was probably one of the reasons why they'd formed such a close-knit group.

At some point, I commented something like: "It's a real shame the Book Dragon doesn't exist. I know exactly what I would ask him."

The bookling named Estrakos, or Estra, who was the group's spokesman, turned to me with amusement. "Oh yeah? What would you ask him then?"

"Well, uh...I would ask him...uh..."

"Hey! Shh!" Estra interrupted me, covering my mouth. "Not so loud—the walls here have ears! Whisper your question to me."

I was a little taken aback, but when he let me go, I whispered the question as directed.

Estra listened attentively, then took a step back. He gazed at me for a long time and said, "By the Orm, little one! That's a really good dragon question. Goodness me." There was genuine appreciation in

[2] English Translation: Socrates, Anacreon, Aristotle, Euripides, Aristophanes, Sophocles

his voice. He went to the other Classics booklings and whispered the question to them. They, too, were impressed.

"Wow! That's a really good question!" exclaimed Arka.

"Absolutely!" Elias agreed. "Hey! Why haven't we thought of that yet?"

"Because we're stupid," said Eidep. "That little guy's really got something going on."

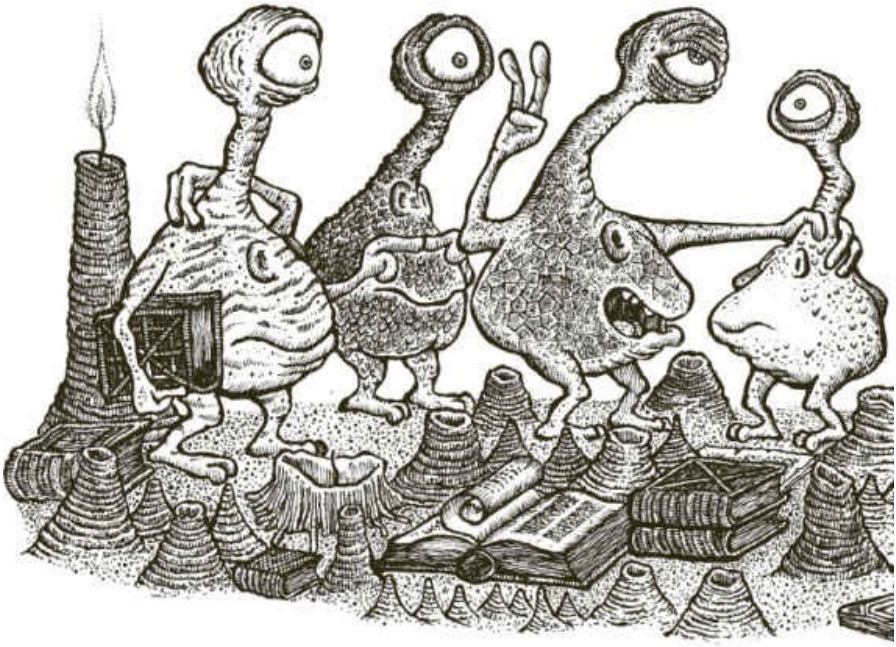
"And yet it's so obvious," Steraph said, grinning.

"That is often the case with good questions," said Kloso. "The trick is figuring them out. Respect, kid!"

"Well..." I said. "A good question is one that identifies the puzzle which requires a satisfactory explanation."

The six Classics formed a semicircle around me.

"Listen, little one," said Estrakos, leaning close and speaking softly. "You seem to be quite advanced for your age. Therefore, I will



tell you a secret that is usually reserved for us older folks—provided that you don't blurt it out. Can you keep a secret?"

I nodded grimly, even though I didn't actually know the answer to his question. How could I? I'd never kept a secret before. Not a single one! No one had ever confided one in me—which tells you how young and inexperienced I was back then.

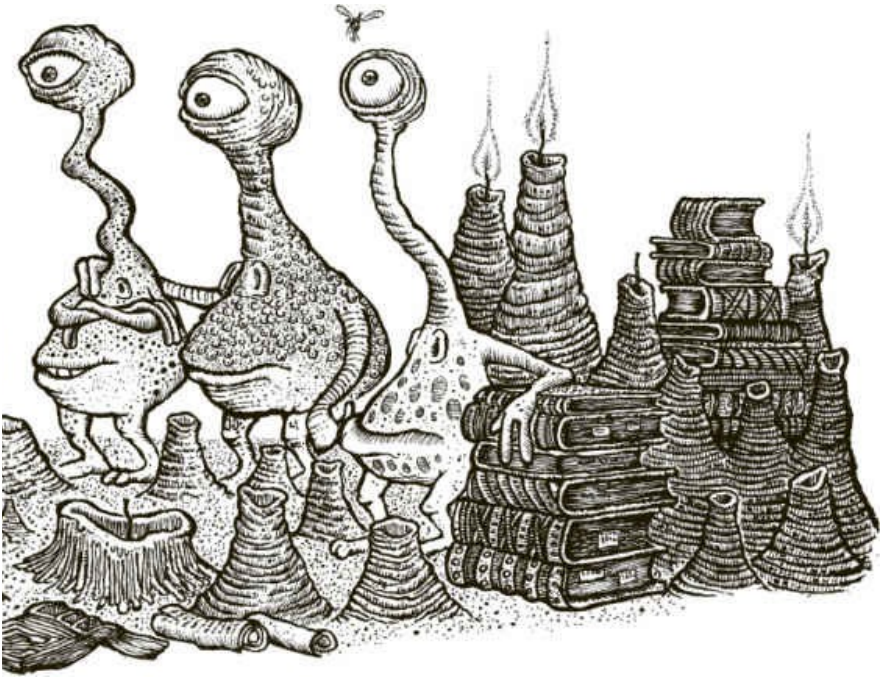
"You were a blank slate," I said, grinning.

"Exactly!" Hildegunst Two nodded again.

But confidence is key, right? Anyway, Estra grabbed me by the shoulders, looked at me intently, and then said solemnly: "Hold on tight, little one: The Book Dragon really exists."

"No!" I gasped, stepping back out of his grasp in my shock.

"Shhh..." Estra shushed, glancing around nervously. "Yes. He exists. Nathaviel. Elivathan. Thanaviel. The Book Dragon. He's alive. I've seen him." Noticing my incredulous look, he pointed to his



friends. "We've *all* seen him. Right, guys?"

The Classics looked at one another as though deciding whether to reveal the truth. Then they nodded together.

"That's right," said Arkaneon gravely. "We saw him. He is…"

"Huge!" Eliastrotes put in.

"Gigantic!" said Eideprius.

"Monstrous!" confirmed Steraphasion.

"Colossal!" said Klosophes.

"Huuuuuuuge," Eideprius added.

"I already mentioned that," Eliastrotes pointed out.

"'Do you hear the dragon's gruff guffaw/ Resounding from its monstrous maw?'" Arkaneon recited dramatically.

"'That's what fulfills a dragon's needs:/ Dastardly dark dragon deeds,'" Klosophes added to the poem, which the two had probably read on a wall in the school toilets. The two Classics laughed and exchanged glances, the meaning of which I didn't understand.

"Is that true?" I asked, still uncertain. "You…you're not kidding me, are you? Because I'm little and all? Hmm?"

Estra gazed at me with mingled pity, sincerity, and affection. "Listen!" he said. "I don't know exactly why the big booklings are pretending the Book Dragon doesn't exist. Perhaps they're worried. They're probably afraid that we'll leave the Leather Grotto on our own and get lost in the Labyrinth. Not entirely without reason—it's super dangerous out there! But the story just wouldn't let us rest, so one day we—"

"Wait a minute!" I interjected. "One day? We just heard the legend of the Book Dragon for the first time today. Together in class."

Estra grinned broadly. "Maybe *you* just learned about the Book Dragon. *We've* known about it for a long time."

"Looong," Arka repeated, drawing out the word.

The others nodded again.

"Oh yeah?" I asked. I was quite small, but not so gullible that I would automatically believe the baseless claims of anyone who was a little bit taller than me. "Where did you get that from?"

Estra looked down at me with a gentle smile. "Why do you think we're all taller than you? Hmm? And older? I'll tell you: We're repeating a year, my friend! We're all doing the school year again."

The others nudged each other with their elbows. "Exactly," said Kloso. "Because it was so good." The whole Classics Gang laughed wickedly at his joke.

And suddenly their group name took on a new, almost comical meaning for me: they were also Classics because they were older than the other students in my class from having to redo the school year.

"You're…repeaters!" I wanted to shout, but managed to bite my tongue just in time. "Sure," I said instead, "I get it." The six of them were closing in on me. I felt somehow disreputable in their company. Rebellious. As if I were being taken in by a gang of outlaws. It was queasy yet thrilling feeling.

Estra put an arm around my shoulder. "Listen," he said, "we want to share our wealth of experience with you, my young friend. Let you benefit from our maturity and wisdom! We don't offer that to everyone."

"Indeed," Arka added. "Be aware of this honor! It's like being knighted. You are one of the chosen. You could become an Ormling. That's an honor that Leather Grotto yearn for but only a select few receive." The others nodded solemnly.

"An…Ormling?" I asked. That was new. I'd heard of the Orm. Of the Orm and of poets imbued with the Orm. Of literature filled with the Orm. I'd even heard about the Orm Swamp in class today. But never of Ormlings.

"We're a secret society," Kloso whispered to me. "An elite unit, so to speak. The best of the very best, you understand? All of us in the grotto are booklings, but only a select few become Ormlings. Only

the chosen ones. We have…" He lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper, "…our own rituals."

"Rituals?" I whispered. The very sound of the word excited me. Was this a blood brotherhood? Did they sing songs in lost languages?

"Tons of rituals!" said Kloso. "And not only that. I'm talking about clandestine meetings. Passwords. Identifying signs. Even secret names."

My heartbeat quickened. "I had no idea such a thing existed!" I gasped.

"I should hope not," Kloso laughed. "Because if you had already known about us, it would mean our secrecy had failed. But we don't fail. Right, guys?"

"Only if we want others to think we've failed," Arka said with a mocking smile. They were breathtakingly arrogant.

"That's right!" confirmed Estra. "If it ever looks like we've failed, it's actually part of our clever strategy. Why did we all fail a grade? Because we're too stupid to pass?" The others laughed derisively. "On the contrary! Because we're too smart to study! Why do you think we memorize all the classics of Zamonian antiquity? Estrakos, Klosophes, Arkaneon? Steraphasion? Hmm? Because they're so incredibly interesting? Those old bores with their tedious tragedies and humorless comedies? Nonsense! We study them because very little of their text has survived! Sometimes, it's just a few clever sayings. Or a thin book of short poems. Actually, a single saying that you recite over and over again is enough."

"You cannot teach a crab to walk straight," declared Steraphasion pompously.

"Caution is the true courage," Eideprius added with pathos.

"Sometimes, it's a misfortune to be right," cried Klosophes, beating his chest.

"To cover up a mistake with a lie is like replacing a stain with a hole," Eliastrotes said solemnly.

"You may enjoy life's pleasures twice as much in old age, the closer you are to death," cried Arkaneon.

"I know that I know nothing," declaimed Estrakos.

"That's enough," said Steraph, waving his hand dismissively. "You see, you have to memorize *far* less with the classics than with most writers. Their sayings don't even have to be good, as you can see. Just because some classic writer uttered something thousands of years ago doesn't necessarily mean it's worthwhile. Got it? We owe our time to other things. To mystery. To adventure."

"It's always an advantage to be underestimated," Elias said. "That's part of our cover. A cloak for our extensive clandestine activities—for our obligations as Ormlings. Naturally, that leaves hardly any time for studying. Who needs all that nerdy stuff anyway?

"If you," Eidep whispered in my ear from the other side, "could become an Ormling?"

Become an Ormling! I was electrified. Good heavens! There was another way of life in the Leather Grotto! You didn't have to lead a mundane existence as a bookling, oh no! You could assume a hidden identity! Lead a second, adventurous life right under the noses of your ignorant neighbors!

"How did you find out about that?" I asked. "I mean, about the dragon thing?"

"Through our tireless undercover investigations," Kloso said.

"By gathering clues and evidence," Arka added.

"Through the power of deduction" Eidep said.

"By eavesdropping," Estra whispered.

Covert investigations! Deductions! Eavesdropping! That sounded even more exciting than code names.

"Well," said Estra. "We just kept our eyes and ears open, didn't we? You wouldn't believe what grownups blurt out when they think we little ones are busy. A playing, school-aged bookling isn't a living person to them at all, but an inanimate object. A piece of furniture.

They think we're completely absorbed in our game. And then they talk, without mincing words—completely shamelessly. But of course, we hear *everything*."

Eidep grinned. "Everything! We splash around with the grownups in the hot springs. We crawl between their legs in the candle factory. We crouch and listen under the tables where they're playing cards or chess. We Ormlings are everywhere and nowhere! We are like shadows: ubiquitous yet ignored. And then they blurt things out—things about the Book Dragon, for example. We overhear details, which we collect. Organize. Archive. Analyze. And eventually coalesce them into suspicion, which we investigate."

"That's how it works. That's our method. That's how we tracked down the Book Dragon," Estra said. "Through tenacious investigative work, deduction, and logic."

I was incredibly impressed. "And the dragon actually lives near the Leather Grotto? Why doesn't he come here?"

"Because he's too big," Arka replied. "The entrances and exits to the Leather Grotto are all too small to allow creatures considerably larger than booklings to pass through. That's an age-old precaution."

"And how do you get to the Orm Swamp? There are quite a few ways out of the Grotto. Which path is the right one?" I asked.

The gang members exchanged conspiratorial glances again. Elias took over. "Well...it's about a half-day's walk from here. Roughly speaking. You know how to get to the Crystal Garden, right? You go all the way through it, along the Amber Stream, and under the glass mushrooms. Leave the Leather Grotto area through the very back exit of the garden, where the emerald trees are. Then, uh, turn left. Behind the last emerald trees, a natural granite staircase leads down. Hardly any bookling ever ventures that way because of that dangerous crystal grass. Stay away from it! Go down the stairs, and you'll come through a tunnel inhabited by some unpleasant insects. Just ignore them; they're not venomous. But they do bite, so don't step on them!

"Once you're out of the tunnel, it'll be even easier." Elias tapped his nose. "You'll navigate by your sense of smell!" He sniffed dramatically. "You can find the dragon by his smell. Or rather, by the smell of the swamp in which he wallows. It smells…uh…old! Very old." Elias exhaled again.

"Yes, exactly," added Kloso. "It stinks! Like Dölerich Hirnfidler's armpits!"

The others laughed, and the tension fell away. I reviewed the directions in my mind. They were indeed easy to remember.

"Thank you so much!" I said. "For your, uh, trust and all." Then I turned to leave, because I wanted to think everything over in peace. *The Book Dragon. The Orm Swamp. Ormlings.* It was quite a lot for a little bookling to take in after a perfectly ordinary school day.

Estra grabbed my arm. "Where are you going, Hildegunst?" he asked.

"I want to find a quiet place," I replied. "I need to think."

Estra's fingers tightened, and he looked deep into my eyes. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready? For what?"

"Are you ready to become an Ormling?"

"Uh…sure!" I said, and I meant it. "That's me. I'll become one. Definitely. Absolutely. Soon." I hoped he would let go of my arm, but he didn't.

Instead, Estra laughed jovially and gripped even tighter. "I expected no other answer. Not from you, my friend. Oh no! Even at our first meeting, I could see the fire burning in your eye. The fire of the Ormlings. You don't want to be just a page in a book, but a chapter! Perhaps even a whole book, cover and all—right? You're something very special, it's clear. And we can make that dream come true for you. So: Are you ready to become an Ormling *now*?"

"Ah…what do you mean by *now*?" I asked, a bit anxious. "Like right now, at this very moment?"

"Exactly. Here and now. Are you ready for your test?"

I was startled. "Wh…what kind of test?" The very word worried me.

Estra grew serious. "Your initiation ritual to become an Ormling. What else? I told you: We have our own rituals. Huuh…" He grinned and waved his hands in the air.

A ritual? This was sudden! As if our teacher had unexpectedly shouted: *Notebooks out! Class test!* I broke out in a sweat.

"Well…" I stammered. "I…um…well…"

"I knew it!" Estra cried to the others. "He is a spirit of our spirit! A born Ormling! He is ready!"

"Yes! Yes! Spirit of our spirit!" the Classics cried out all at once. "The test! Give him the task! The task!" They surrounded me so completely that escape was impossible.

"Listen!" said Estra, her voice now subdued again. "Your task is divided into three parts. One: Go to the Orm Swamp. Two: Find the Book Dragon. You can't miss him. Three: Get us a scale from his armor—you know, one of those embedded Orm books, right? That's all. And while you're there, you can ask him your question."

"That's all!" Kloso repeated.

"A task only a true Ormling can accomplish," intoned Eidep, nodding gravely. "Simple and difficult at the same time. That's how it has to be. Simple and difficult." The others murmured something unintelligible, but it sounded assent.

"Yes, uh…how…where…?" I tried to formulate a question that would buy me some time, but Estra was already pulling me away, and the others scattered in all directions. I was confused, impressed, flattered, and frightened all at once.

"Now go!" Estra cried dramatically, releasing me and giving me a slap, like an animal being set free. "Go on, little one. Future Ormling! Fulfill your destiny! Don't disappoint us! Don't disappoint yourself! Good luck! And be careful! A thousand dangers lurk out

there in the swamp. Creatures and plants that shouldn't even exist. We're keeping our fingers crossed for you." He put a finger to his lips. "And not a word! To anyone!" Then he ran off too.

There I stood, completely bewildered. My knees were shaky. Just moments ago, I had been a simple bookling; now, I was an aspiring Ormling with a secret mission.

Awaiting me: A test. A ritual. A Book Dragon. A swamp full of Orm-soaked books. Creatures that shouldn't exist.

What was I supposed to do? What would *you* have done?

In the Orm Swamp

ildegunst Two looked at me as if he expected me to continue the story.

"I understand," I replied. "Of course, you set off immediately."

"Exactly! Right away," replied the bookling. "Without any preparation, without marching gear. Just like that."

"That sounds familiar," I said. "That's how I left Lindworm Castle, back in the day. I had provisions with me, though."

"Well," said Hildegunst Two, "I was convinced the matter would be settled within a day. I simply followed Elias's directions, crossed the Crystal Garden to the Emerald Trees, watched out for the sharp grasses, found the aforementioned staircase, and went through the tunnel. That did indeed house a few disgusting insects, but they were either asleep or dead—you never really know with insects. As promised, that tunnel was so narrow that there was no way a dragon could fit through it. At least, not a fully grown one. And then I was out of the Leather Grotto. Just like that! I found myself in a cave that had a low ceiling but was otherwise enormous. Here and there were gleaming yellow crystals, like in the Crystal Forest, but otherwise the lighting was sparse. From now on, my sense of smell

would guide me, Elias had claimed. And so it was.

"There are hot springs in the Leather Grotto, but they're only made of clear water that has passed through hard rock. They have practically no odor of their own, only an occasional hint of sulfur. I therefore assumed that the unique, earthy, damp smell that now guided my steps came from the Orm Swamp. Just the aroma of withered tomes wouldn't have led me there, because that scent permeates the catacombs. No, this was something different, a completely new olfactory experience, an unknown world. It was extremely humid, the air heavy with the sharp perfume of decaying paper, rotting vegetation, and brackish water. It was unpleasant and a little frightening, but also excitingly new and different, wild and mysterious. I quickened my pace. Eager and fearful at the same time, I wanted to see what I was smelling.

"There were also unfamiliar, unsettling noises: sporadic bubbling and hissing, gurgling and sloshing. As if there were bellows working underwater. The persistent buzzing and humming of flying insects became increasingly bothersome: sociable will-o'-the-wisps, constantly changing color, swarmed around me. Tiny, bloodthirsty midges gathered intrusively close. Even smaller, almost invisible flies frantically fed on the fluid of my eyes. In addition, there were transparent dragonflies of astonishing size with four or even six wings, and unpleasantly shrill, sawing crickets without eyes, but with excessively long antennae. I had never encountered such a diverse and impressive insect world in the Leather Grotto."

"The insect world of the catacombs is one of the reasons why I could never stand being down here for any length of time," I interrupted. "I simply don't understand how you can bear it."

Hildegunst Two looked at me with his single eye and shrugged. "It's all what you're used to," he replied, and then continued with his story.

"The ground increasingly became soft, something I had never

experienced before. My soles had only known stony ground—granite, igneous, or polished marble. But now, with every step, I had the sensation of treading into something damp, yielding, almost alive. This unsettled me. Would I sink in with the next step? Or the one after that? I had never had to tread so carefully. I had heard of bookworms who had sunk and suffocated in so-called *quicksand books*. These are piles of ancient tomes that appear perfectly intact at first glance, but that in reality are so dehydrated that they immediately crumble into the finest dust when touched or stepped on. In large quantities, they can become deadly traps.

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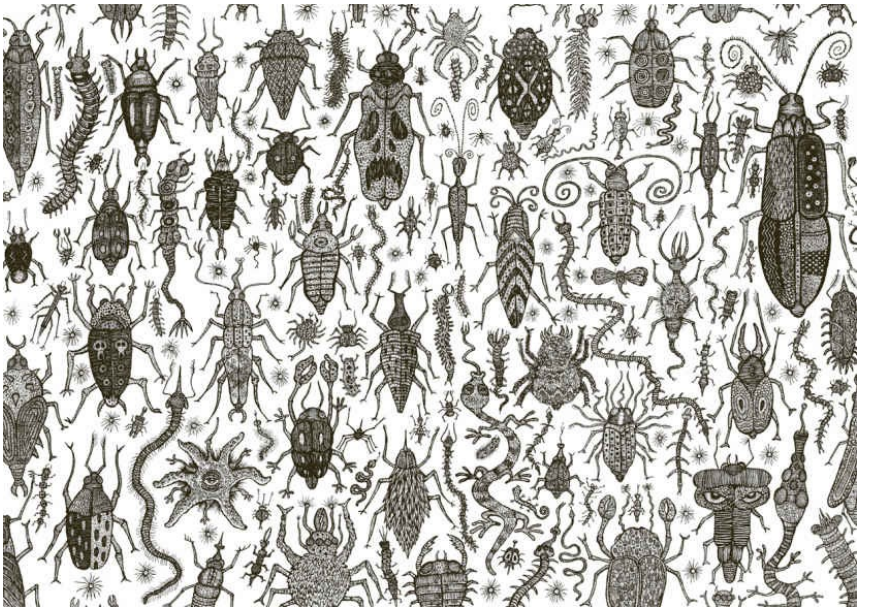
"But with the bloated books in this swamp (I was apparently already in the middle of it) the problem wasn't a lack of moisture but the opposite. Here, one could literally sink into a literary morass. Besides old books, the Magmass had washed in the other detritus of civilization, along with loads of loose earth, sand, peat, and even plants that must have come from the surface world. Probably, an entire moor had once been washed down by the Magmass, including plants and animals that then adapted or mutated in the depths. There was no other way to explain the curious, colorless, and limp plants growing everywhere, sprawling in all directions."

"They must have been looking for the sun," I interrupted again.

"Indeed, though the sun doesn't shine down there, these plants still existed, probably clinging to life with their last ounce of strength. Everything looked pale and sickly. On the surface of the swamp floated limp, saucer-shaped leaves, on which sometimes sat iridescent violet frogs without eyes, croaking reproachfully. Here and there, moss-covered stalagmites jutted out of the bog, some of them enormous. And the swamp was teeming with life despite all the decay, I tell you! Myriad insects crawled through the mud, insects that hopefully exist only there and nowhere else! Creatures with more than four legs are unpleasant enough, but when they also look sick or half-dead, or like the skeletons of insects—that's truly depressing, believe me! In addition, there was plenty of other vermin. Mostly with abnormal anatomy and slimy skin. Worms, lizards, leeches, snails, fish with legs...yuck!

Hildegunst Two shuddered, and his vivid descriptions made me uneasy in turn. "Were there water snakes?" I asked. "I find them particularly unpleasant."



"I hadn't even known about snakes before then," replied the bookling, "and I could have continued to live quite happily with that gap in my knowledge. These long, creepy, legless reptiles with inquisitive tongues instilled in me a completely new kind of fear. And I didn't even know they could be venomous!

"There were also mammals, as far as I could tell with my modest biological knowledge. Small, nervous, furry creatures with bright green eyes and sharp yellow teeth, moving far too quickly through the oily water...brrr! Luckily, they seemed even more afraid of me than I was of them! And other creatures that surfaced and submerged so quickly in the numerous pools and ponds, large and small, that I couldn't even begin to describe them. There was more biodiversity in the Orm Swamp than I had ever seen before. I think I even saw animatomes."[3]

"Really? Animatomes?"

"I'm not entirely sure," the bookling replied with a shrug. "It all happened so fast. There were books with red eyes sparkling in their top edges, and they disappeared in a flash when they saw me."

[3] Animatomes are a legendary form of existence inhabiting the Catacombs of Bookholm. They are a hybrid of animal and book, said to be as dangerous as large predators.

"How were you able to see anything at all?" I asked. "Were there more glowing crystals?"

"Not crystals, but there was plenty of light scattered about," replied Hildegunst Two. "In some places, phosphorescent plants provided pulsating light, along with fungi, algae, and glowing moss. Bioluminescent jellyfish drifted underwater, looking quite eerie. 'Twilight' wouldn't be the right word; 'islands of light' captures the scene more vivid. So there were abundant light sources, here and there carving a patch out of the darkness. And then, darkness again. Light, darkness; light, darkness. And then darkness again. Light, darkness, light, darkness. I could see a lot, but nothing clearly, you know?

"And then all the noises. Were those frogs making those strange trumpeting sounds? Or something else entirely? I knew the chirping of crickets; it happened occasionally in the Leather Grotto, too. But this gurgling and wheezing wasn't just strange and eerie, it was also downright unappetizing. It sounded like one enormous creature with indigestion, with constant stomach rumbling, belching, and"—the bookworm searched for the right word —"flatulence! But in reality, it was countless creatures, a crazy underground oasis, a reservoir that, with its moisture and diverse food supply, magnetically attracted and sheltered all kinds of species. Not just animals, but plants too. And who knows what else! Hybrid creatures, crossbreeds of flora and fauna—everything that can be thirsty. I saw mushrooms with gills, fish with hair, beings made of mud and roots.

"The only familiar things were the old books, which were truly ubiquitous. In all their forms of decay, they floated like dead fish on the black pools. They piled up in the mire, forming hills and mounds inhabited by legions of insects: maggots, beetles, mites, worms, and lice, which ceaselessly decomposed, chewed, and pierced them. A constant crackling, crunching, and rustling filled the air; an eternal

feast was underway. Paper and leather were also being digested by molds, which patiently and silently transformed their food into a dim light. Some areas of the swamp glowed with a ghostly green that lay over things like a shroud. Sometimes everything was bathed in bluish or violet light."

"Were there any other signs of civilization?" I asked the bookling. "Besides books and paper?"

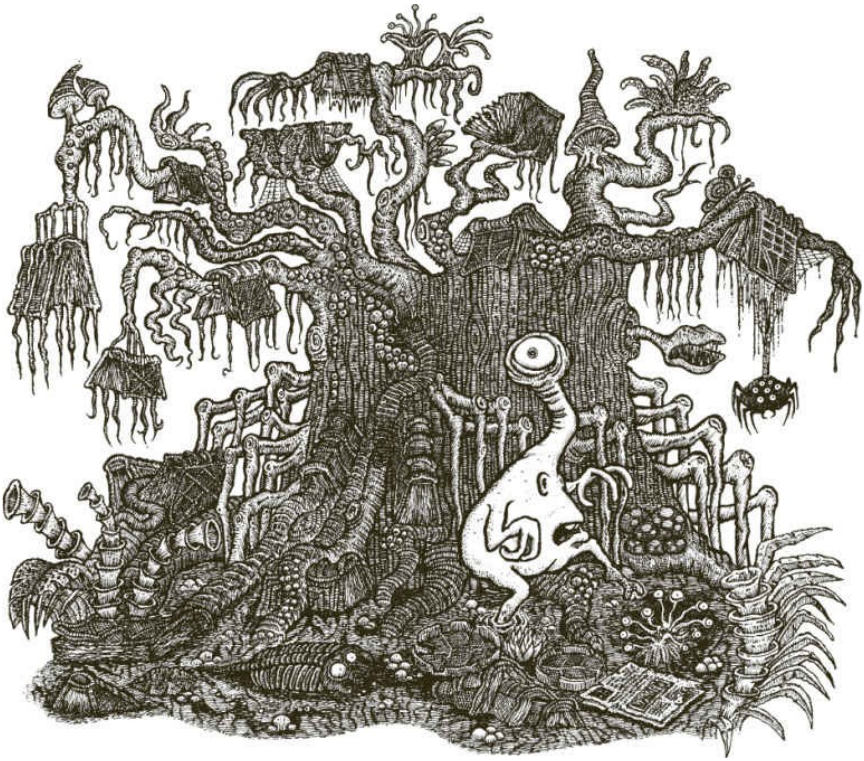
Hildegunst Two thought for a moment. "If you found a rotten wooden plank down there, that was already a sign of civilization. Here And there, the remains of library cabinets jutted out of the swamp, often containing moldy books. I saw a complete grandfather clock emerging from the bog, covered in snails. Shattered spiral staircases that looked like the skeletons of giant fish. I saw copper kettles, chairs, and desks. Vases, plates. A huge gong! Entire university libraries, furniture and all, seemed to have washed up there, the shelves sometimes completely smashed, sometimes astonishingly well preserved. There were triangular and pentagonal books, even star-shaped and round ones! Rare stuff from sunken cultures, from long-forgotten peoples. I didn't even try to pull the swollen tomes out of the mud to check what was still readable, because it seemed all too predictable that only maggots and cockroaches would tumble out. Or something even more unpleasant. Literary scholars and antiquarian booksellers would lose their minds in the Orm Swamp, believe me! So much irreplaceable stuff crumbling in your hands, it breaks your heart. It was like walking across a battlefield full of dying people you can't help anymore. The morbid swamp water eventually destroys everything. Some of the books were swollen to two or three times their original size, bursting at the seams from the dampness or breaking into thick chunks of papier-mâché. Individual pages, scraps of paper, and richly decorated book covers floated everywhere in the pools. Here and there, small, tree-like plants

sprouted from the brown water. They had robust aerial roots and were densely covered with moss and fungi, with corkscrew-like twisted branches from which books hung like rotting fruit.

"It was fascinating and eerie at the same time, the stuff of dreams and nightmares. Trees with books hanging from them! Were these overgrown old tomes really all filled with the Orm? I lacked everything to check: the time, the leisure, the knowledge of ancient languages. Presumably, they were mostly quite ordinary and uninteresting books, like in almost any library. Or were they?"

"The Orm is often used for mythological exaggeration," I replied. "But sometimes a book is just a book, isn't it?"

The bookling nodded. "Call me an ignoramus if you like," he said, "because I was trampling one old tome after another with my feet



instead of checking their contents. Whether I wanted to or not, there was no other way to get around! The swamp was considerably more extensive and confusing than I had expected. I felt like I was wading around in it for hours, and my legs ached from the strenuous movements. It was as if I had suction cups on my feet; every step was an effort.

"If there was a cave ceiling above me, I couldn't see it. Up there, there seemed to be only an unfathomable darkness, from which an occasional hoarse cry rang out. And anyway, what was I even doing in this sick place? What was I doing there? Good heavens, this was something completely different from our manageable and reassuringly lifeless mineral crystal gardens, where we booklings relax and stroll around! A frighteningly organic and vibrant world, the likes of which shouldn't even exist in the catacombs if things were as they should be in biological terms. So: What was I actually doing here?"

"You wanted to become an Ormling," I answered the bookling's question, to remind him of his mission.

"Yes! No! Yes!" cried Hildegunst Two, throwing his arms in the air. "That means: Not anymore! I didn't want to be an Ormling anymore! This was clearly far too high a price to pay for belonging to an organization! No matter how secret it was. If there was a dragon who felt comfortable in such an unpleasant and exhausting place and stayed there voluntarily for an extended period of time—then he must be a pretty unpleasant and exhausting dragon, wouldn't you say? He must have been completely out of his mind to live here! And I didn't want to get to know him anymore. No matter how all-knowing, good-natured, or Orm-saturated he was. I only wanted one thing: to go back to the Leather Grotto. Now!

"I turned in circles, trying to figure out the direction I should take back. That wasn't easy, because I had simply marched forward without noticing any landmarks. Everything here looked the same

or similar! A labyrinth without walls! There were no footprints in that mud to guide me. If I hadn't heard that strange singing at that moment, I probably would have just started marching off in any direction, blindly hoping that the path would lead me to the Leather Grotto.

"Singing song? You heard music?"

"Yes. A kind of spoken chant. From the depths of the Orm Swamp." The bookling nodded.

"So? What did you do?" I asked curiously.

Dragon Song

aturally, I was—what should one call it? Brainless? Crazy? Stupid? I moved straight toward the singing, that's what I did. As if pulled by a string. But I felt strangely safe doing so. The dampness above the moor had thickened into a dense soup—a rich, watery mist, like you see at the hot springs of the Leather Grotto, you know? This fog gave me the illusion of being invisible. I think I was completely out of my mind at that moment anyway. And then I could suddenly understand what that strange, thin voice was singing:

By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill beings only,
Where a phantom shade named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have reached these lands but newly
From a dim and strange land, truly–
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of SPACE–Out of TIME.

Was that voice singing about me? The words certainly fit my current situation perfectly:

Bottomless vales and boundless floods,
And chasms, and caves, and giant woods,
With forms that no man can discover
For the tears that drip all over;
Mountains toppling evermore
Into seas without a shore;
Seas that restlessly aspire,
Surging, unto skies of fire;
Lakes that endlessly outspread
Their lone waters–lone and dead,–
Their still waters–still and chilly
With the snows of the lolling lily.

"That sounds familiar," I interrupted. "Isn't that, uh…a poem by Perla la Gadeon?"[4]

"Exactly." The bookling nodded again.

Well, whoever was singing that had excellent literary taste, didn't they? And finally, I could even see him—or her or it or whatever. Or at least sense him/her. A ghostly apparition was staggering above the swamp. Just a shadow, long and thin like a slender tree. It seemed be swaying back and forth to the rhythm of this strange song. Flexible like one of those snakes I'd seen for the first time today. Yes, exactly like the enormous effigy of a snake!

I stopped. Strangely enough, I no longer felt fear. Awe? Something like that. Respect? Absolutely. But fear? No. I simply couldn't move. I stared, mesmerized, at this swaying apparition.

"You're surprised by my voice, aren't you?" said the long shadow. "You imagined it as deep and rolling. Like a toad speaking from a

[4] English Translation: Compare "Dream-Land" by Edgar Allen Poe.

well. Something like that? Dragons in fairy tales always have deep voices, don't they? Shhh…"

So that was him, the dragon! The Book Dragon! Not a ghost. Not a figment of the imagination. That was him: Nathaviel. The Orm Dragon.

"That's thanks to the intellectual laziness and lack of imagination of the fairytale writers," the thin voice continued. "We dragons have wings. We can fly, and we lay eggs! What, pray tell, is the name given to the kind of animal that possesses such qualities? Hm? Hhhh…"

"Uh…harpy?" I asked in return. I tried in vain to wipe the fog from my eyes to see better.

"What?" asked the shadow. "Uh…no! Bird! Dragons are actually birds. And have you ever met a bird with a deep, gurgling voice?"

"I, uh, have actually never met a bird, let alone heard one," I answered as honestly and firmly as possible. "I'm a bookling. A bookling who's never left the catacombs. The only flying creatures I know are bats. And harpy eagles. And insects. Unless bats count as birds." I swatted at the persistent mosquitoes buzzing around me.

The shadow swayed almost imperceptibly. "Oh, I see," he said uncertainly. "Right. A bookling. Uh…now you've thrown me off." The thin voice cleared its throat. "Never seen a bird before, have you? Understandable, being a bookling. Nothing to be done about it. Shhh…well, I spent a good part of my youth on the surface until I ended up in the catacombs. So, well, birds. They are, uh, are…"

"I know what birds are," I ventured to interject. "I've read about them. I've just never seen one. Or even heard one."

"You should make up for that," whispered the shadow. "The songs of songbirds are one of the more beautiful things up there. Like the clouds. The sky. The wind. The rain. And the maidens."

I had to swallow hard. "Maidens?" I asked, uncertain.

The shadow cleared its throat again. "That was just a joke. An old dragon joke. Which obviously doesn't get any better with repetition.

As I just noticed. Otherwise, you might have laughed. Yes, that's one of those nasty rumors that stubbornly clings to us, that we eat virgins: He's big, has scales, breathes fire, and can fly? Then he eats maidens too! Ugh! Well, we've learned to take this legend ironically. There's no point getting worked up about it every time. The scientific fact is that, according to our biological lineage, we are indeed birds. And we primarily eat plants. Mostly. Occasionally a few insects, because they're healthy and have such a nice crunch when you chew them. But eating *whole maidens*? Do you know how *that* crunches? Disgusting. Seriously, who actually comes up with this stuff? You'd have to be crazy. Oh, boy—I hate explaining jokes. Can we change the subject? Hhhhhh…

I interrupted the bookworm. "What do those strange noises you occasionally make actually mean? That 'Hhhh', and 'Ffff' and 'Ssss'?"

"Well," replied Hildegunst Two. "A monstrous organism like the Book Dragon naturally makes its own unique noises. With all the tubes and conduits running through its body, that's only natural. Perhaps it simply needs to release air occasionally. Regulate the pressure. Dragon noises, indeed. Besides a few others, there were three sounds in particular that repeated regularly. One was a serpentine hiss: *Ssss…* Another a ghostly sigh: *Hhhh…* And the third a toneless whistle: *Ffff…* Perhaps they are expressions of emotions and feelings, corresponding to our facial expressions. Like the purring of cats or the croaking of us booklings. It's simply part of the creature; it's its acoustic trademark."

Nathaviel

ealous as he was, Hildegunst Two's cyclops eye gleamed ever more intensely the further he got in his story.

"Oh, I see," I said. "It's dragon language. You explain that very clearly."

"Thank you very much," said Hildegunst Two. "Where was I?" He looked at me questioningly, as if he expected an answer from me.

"Ah yes..."

The shadow suddenly moved towards me—and stepped out of the mist. A paw, as big as a table, slapped into the swamp water right in front of me. Splat! The water splashed in all directions, and my heart skipped a beat. The paw looked to me like the hand of a giant with three thumbs. With this dragon's single step, the physical conditions around me changed dramatically. Cottony ground fog billowed in my direction, the swampy ground beneath me swayed, and a wave of bestial odor washed over me.

Next, I glimpsed the dragon's head, then the monster's neck and chest. Nathaviel moved with the self-assurance of the main character in a play by Eseila Whimpershlaak. Like a seasoned actor emerging

from behind the curtain, fully aware of the effect he has on the audience. I had never seen such a massive, living being before. Indeed, I hadn't even imagined that so much life could be concentrated in a single body. The Book Dragon's neck was longer than the tallest stalagmite, its head larger than the most massive boulder in the Leather Grotto. Its legs were pillars that could have supported entire cave roofs. Its chest and belly—well, I'm at a loss for words. Large, you see? Enormous and broad and long! Mighty. [Hildegunst Two stretched his arms as wide as they would go.]

That alone would have been enough, to impress me beyond measure. But there was something else. Something surpassingly extraordinary: The dragon consisted mostly of—books. Literally! Of ancient tomes. Imagine the most magnificent library you have ever

seen! An overflowing university or museum library. Shelf upon shelf crammed with ancient, precious tomes, leather-bound, embossed, gilt-edged, sewn, with ribbon bookmarks—and this entire library suddenly springs into action. Grows legs. Has a body. A neck and a head. Wings! Then you have the Book Dragon! The Orm Dragon! Or let's say: The faintest impression of it, for it was only the vague outline of

the creature that emerged from the mist towards me. Nathaviel. Elivathan, Thanaviel, Levanthia. Ilathevan. Take your pick!

"So it's not a legend after all," I said.

"No. Oh no! Not at all. Not a myth. Not a fairy tale. Not something from school lessons. But a being of flesh and blood. And books."

"So?" I asked, trying to sound as unimpressed as possible. "What happened? He didn't eat you. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

"Yes," said Hildegunst Two. "He *devoured* me."

"What?"

"He ate me. But not in the way you think. May I continue the story?"

"It's okay," I mumbled, embarrassed, and raised my hands defensively. "No more interruptions. It's *your* story. Sorry."

"So..." Hildegunst Two continued. "The Book Dragon stopped. 'Welcome!' he murmured in his thin voice. Then he lowered his mighty head so low to me that I could smell his breath. He smelled... yes... what did he smell like? It was a smell like... like..." The bookling paused. "Do you remember," he asked, "how you described the smell of the city of Bookholm in your book *The City of Dreaming Books*?"

"Of course," I replied. "Not necessarily word for word, but..."

"But I do!" the bookling interrupted. "I know every word, every sentence of your book by heart. That is my destiny. You write: It reeks of old books. It's as if you've opened the door of a gigantic second-hand bookshop—as if you've stirred up a cloud of unadulterated book dust and blown the detritus from millions of mouldering volumes straight into your face. That's exactly what the breath of the Book Dragon smelled like."

The bookling took a deep breath and went on.

"Welcome to the worst of all worlds," the dragon greeted me. "Welcome to the Orm Swamp.'"

"Uh...good afternoon!" I said, trying to sound polite. "So...this is the worst of all possible worlds?"

"Well, what do you think of this place?" asked the dragon. "Please! Just look around you! If it were just a little worse, it would be completely unbearable. Does the term *miasma* mean anything to you?"

Now, I didn't know what to say. He was absolutely right, of course: this *was* the most inhospitable and uncivilized place I had ever seen, no question about it. But I only knew the Leather Grotto. No matter: if I agreed with him now, I would be insulting his nest or hunting grounds or whatever. Perhaps even his *homeland.* And if I disagreed, I would be contradicting him. Not a good start to a relaxed conversation.

"The books are very interesting!" I tried as a diplomatic alternative.

"Yes, the books..." sighed the dragon. "They're really what's got me, shall I say...swamped." He laughed joylessly at the weak pun. "*This book has changed my life!*—do you know that stupid saying? "

I nodded eagerly.

"Well, in my case it's true. Literally. Though in the plural: *These books have changed my life.* Thoroughly." The dragon took another step, emerging about halfway out of the mist. Or was it only a quarter? An eighth? How big was he really? How many legs did he actually have? Four? Six? Twelve? A hundred? What I could see so far was quite enough for me. I didn't want to know any more about its size at the moment. Luckily, it stopped.

"Yeeess..." he continued, "without books, it would be unbearable. Reading: the only true painkiller for enduring life, isn't it? In my case, you should call it *bookwallowing*; that's more accurate. That's simply my preferred way of consuming books: to wallow in them. It bears little resemblance to reading, but the result is roughly the same. The end justifies the means. Ffff..." The dragon emitted its toneless whistle again.

"How does it feel," I asked the bookling, "to have a conversation

with such a physically overwhelming creature? Isn't it terribly frightening?"

Hildegunst Two considered this briefly. "Well—there's a certain feeling of inferiority involved in conversing with a fully grown, articulate dragon. Nevertheless, I felt treated with respect and courtesy, as the lizard was friendly and obviously had polite manners. Did that reassure me? No, I can't exactly say so. I suppose I would have felt a similar sense of unease if I had been conversing with a monstrous snake that had me in a stranglehold. Or with a giant spider while I was stuck in its web. The dragon was completely in his element, and I was merely a spectator. A frog who accidentally hopped into his pond. A conversation at eye level looks quite different, my dear fellow! But still, Nathaviel spoke to me as if to an old friend."

"So you...are a bookling, then..." the dragon said thoughtfully. "I've occasionally seen a few booklings here in the Orm Swamp. But only from a great distance. Glowing yellow eyes in the mist, long necks sticking out of some swamp vegetation. That's all I got, unfortunately. Nervous, shy creatures—like sparrows. I think they were watching me. Probably even studying me. But as soon as I approached them—whoosh!—they were gone again. Making contact was impossible. Shhh... Until now, anyway. You didn't run away. That's unusual. You're something special, aren't you?" The dragon stared at me with undisguised curiosity and amusement. "You look funny. Only one eye! You can't see very well in three dimensions with that, can you?" He laughed jovially.

I was overcome by the unsettling thought that I had made the biggest mistake of my life. I was the first bookling to dare to approach the Book Dragon so closely! No one before me had been that stupid.

"I think you booklings are a rather intelligent bunch," Nathaviel continued. "That's why you're so nervous. So cautious. So timid. Intelligence makes you timid, doesn't it? But cowards live longer.

Better a timid genius than a fearless idiot, right? In this enchanted swamp, the skeletal remains of quite a few brave morons sprout from the ground. Adventurers, bookhunters, lunatics. I always bury them headfirst, and most are quite young. But I've never buried a bookling." The dragon laughed shrilly, and with a jerk, his head and neck disappeared back into the mist. Then I heard him marching around there, with loud, splashing steps. Was he circling me? I heard him here, I heard him there. Sometimes I thought he was on the right, then on the left. Was he, with his serpentine body, forming a ring of walls? With me as a prisoner in the middle? For a while, I only heard him panting and groaning, even sneezing once. Then he suddenly stopped, coughed sneezingly—and poked his head out of the fog again, in a completely different place than where he had disappeared.

"Don't think for a second that I kill everyone who dares to enter my domain. That's not how it is! Really. But I have become a bit more selective about visitors lately. It used to be different. Very different!"

The dragon stepped two or three paces out of the mist, so that I could see his neck and legs again. He bent his forelegs and sank down into the mud. Above and behind me, I heard something hissing through the air; it was probably the tip of his tail. My feeling of being encircled by his body intensified. But I was careful not to bring up the subject. Its body must have been incredibly long.

"Oh, really?" I said as casually as possible. "What, uh, was so different back then, if I may ask?"

"You're interested in that?" Nathaviel asked. "This nostalgic nonsense. Really? Well, then I'd better start again from the beginning," he sighed. "It's a rather long story. With a clear, linear structure, by the way. Nothing experimental. It's best told from beginning to end, as it should be."

"Yes," I replied, "that interests me very much." And that wasn't even a lie. As long as the dragon was talking, I could devise escape plans.

In the Catacombs

ildegunst Two raised both hands like a conductor, which he did almost every time he continued his story:

"I was quite a wild bird in my youth, I can say that with good reason," said Nathaviel, laughing. "Yes, I know, I know! That sounds like a tree boasting about being made of wood, doesn't it? What dragon *isn't* wild? Especially in his youth? But I really did live it up, in the truest sense of the word. I didn't turn down a single maiden, I can tell you that. Good heavens.'"

"So you did eat virgins after all?" The cheeky question just blurted out of me, and I immediately regretted it. "Uh… you just said that was a lazy prejudice." Drat! I'd put my foot in it with my very first attempt at conversation! A long pause ensued. I hunched my neck and braced myself for a harsh retort.

"Well…" Nathaviel finally answered, surprisingly mildly, almost meekly. "A few, admittedly. *Devoured* isn't quite the right word. Let's say: bitten into. Chewed on them a bit. Tasted them, so to speak. And were they all really virgins? Well… who knows for sure?" He laughed again.

"And anyway, that's just the expectation people have of us dragons. *Dragons eat maidens! Dragons raid defenseless villages! Dragons kill knights!* And so on. As a young lizard, it's incredibly difficult to break out of that kind of role model." So you try out a maiden or two! Just to meet expectations. And they don't even taste good! Believe me! Or you kill a few knights. Besiege a castle or two. Raid a small town. That sort of thing. Well—and before you know it, you've fulfilled every cliché and you're on the wanted list. You don't build a stable circle of friends that way, I can tell you! It got to the point where I couldn't show my face anywhere without huge spear throwers or cannons immediately appearing. *The dragon is coming! Alarm! The dragon is coming! Hide the maidens! Get the fire arrows!* Entire armies of knights armed to the teeth were after me. There were even wanted posters for me. With pictures!

Bounties were placed on heads. Cities were covered with dragon-proof wire netting. Drinking water reservoirs were poisoned. A cousin of mine died a painful death from internal bleeding, simply because he was thirsty! Sometimes I'd just be sailing around aimlessly —and suddenly, burning projectiles and poison spears would be flying all around me. I'm pretty well armored these days, but back then I was far from invulnerable. I definitely had my weak spots, especially around my belly. That was the reason I retreated underground. Just for a while, I thought. To get some peace and quiet. To let some things settle. To clear my head. It wasn't a big decision; dragons don't have a problem with solitude, you know. Hmmm... We're solitary creatures by nature, perfectly happy on our own. I didn't intend to vegetate in the Underworld forever, though, or become a hermit. A break, that was all I wanted. To slow down a bit, nothing more. So I entered the Underworld rather casually. At a fairly high altitude, through a cave entrance in the Midgard Mountains. Therefore, I didn't even feel like I was going *underground* or hiding away. I was simply observing it, so to speak. as my holiday apartment. *Dragonfell*

Castle–a kind of robber baron's castle, from which I could overlook the entire area. I soon discovered that living in a mountain has two crucial advantages. Number one: No fire arrows fly around in enclosed cave systems. Number two: Knights armed to the teeth are rather reluctant to climb to high altitudes with their horses. In other words: It simply became quieter. Safer. More boring—yes, that too, admittedly. But somehow more comfortable. I developed regular sleeping and eating habits. I wasn't used to that at all. It was such a gradual process that you hardly notice yourself. Little by little, I went outside less and less. I found my food and water within the mountains. I explored the underground world, wandered around in spacious tunnels. There were beautiful stalactite grottoes. Crystal forests. Old mines. Underground lakes and rivers full of fish. Springs, waterfalls. While hunting, I ventured ever deeper into the depths, devouring the small animal population of one level after another. And so, little by little, I descended deeper and deeper into the underworld. Almost imperceptibly. Until one day I barely knew what a daytime sky or a starry canopy looked like. Well, other wonders opened up to me instead, believe me. I discovered entire cities, explored unknown civilizations, both dead and living. To explain them in detail would be beyond the scope of this, and that's not the point here. How I ultimately ended up in the Orm Swamp—that's a whole eventful story in itself. One that earned me several different names.

"Nathaviel, Elivathan, Thanaviel, Levanthia, Ilathevan…" I recited. The names I had heard in legends class.

"Exactly. And a few others. You know your stuff, kid! Ffff… Yes, almost every articulate Zamonian tribe in the Underworld between the Midgard Mountains and the Leather Grotto has its own name for me. Fnugh. Zokkd. Oggoggo—that's what the primitive tribes of the middle catacombs called me. Among the Living Dead, I didn't even have a name. No name, but they had a gesture for me that, to them,

was synonymous with the end of all things." The dragon held up a claw and clenched it into a fist, as if violently crumpling something, then opened it again and let it drop casually into the swamp water.

"But down here I'm known not only by many different names, but also in many different supposed forms. Some say I'm one hundred florinthian cubits long, others say two hundred fathoms. Sometimes I'm said to have wings like a bat, then again like a butterfly. Others say I have wings of gold or of leather. Some believe I have six legs, others claim a dozen, and still others say one hundred and twenty-two. It all depends on which catacomb folk is currently peddling my legend." The dragon laughed hoarsely.

"I really can't say that I behaved any differently down here than I did in the Upworld. That came later. At first, I just carried on as before. You know: spreading fear and terror. If you haven't learned anything else, you just do what you can. And spreading fear and terror, I could do that!" The dragon sighed again. "To make a long story short: I eventually ended up stranded in the labyrinths of Bookholm. More precisely, here in the Orm Swamp. Back then, it didn't even have a name; it was just a swamp. I can't say that I particularly liked it here at first. Not at all. I actually thought I was just passing through. There was still so much to explore in the catacombs. I hadn't even seen Shadowhall Castle yet."

"You know about Shadowhall Castle?" I asked the dragon.

"Shadow Hall? The legend of the Shadow King? Of course, it is now. A catacomb historian told me about it in detail:"

A placed accurséd and forlorn
with walls of books piled high,
its windows stare like sightless eyes
and through the phantoms fly.
Of leather and of paper built,
worm-eaten through and through,

the castle known as Shadowhall.
brings every nightmare true.

Whoa… But when I arrived here, I didn't know that yet. I only knew that I wanted to keep going, as always. That was just my general direction: always onward. But the Orm Swamp was an extraordinary and fascinating place. The crucial advantage over most other areas of the Maze is that there's always plenty of food and water here. Water is the most important thing, right? Number one in the struggle for survival: hydration. In that respect, there are no supply problems here. Because the Magmass pumps its riches ceaselessly into this bottomless swamp, and they don't simply drain away again because it's like a giant sponge. A gigantic water reservoir without equal in the catacombs. An oasis, paradise for many creatures. Gradually, nature has also provided sufficient light, and the constant temperature is practically ideal for dragons. So I got stuck here. I didn't even really realize it at first. "I'm leaving again tomorrow," I thought over and over. "Just one more night's sleep here." The dragon laughed.

Gradually, the fog lifted as he spoke, and I could see more and more clearly that he had indeed draped his enormous body all around me. Was this intentional? A strategy? Was he systematically surrounding me?

"And then, of course, there was all the literature," Nathaviel continued. "Although the bloated tomes initially made me feel quite at home…" I wasn't very interested. I couldn't even read! I didn't even know what reading was! Books were like stones to me. Dead things without meaning. I was still an animal! A bird with scales. You couldn't eat the sticky lumps either—well, anyway, they didn't fill you up.

I tried it a few times on my journey through the catacombs, in varying degrees of despair. But eventually, I learned that lesson. Therefore, I paid as little attention to the books here in the swamp as to all the others, the tens of thousands and millions I had seen before. They were as meaningless to me as empty seashells, dried-out

sponges, or bleached starfish. Scenery without practical value, as nourishing as the dry leaves of the trees or the tough grass in the forests of Aboveworld.

Nevertheless, I had little choice but to somehow cope with the overabundance of books. They're simply ubiquitous in the Orm Swamp. And given my size, it would have been impossible to find a place to sleep without any of them. So I simply lay down on top of them whenever I felt like resting or sleeping. Dragons don't really have a fixed sleeping place. Quite the opposite, in fact. Since they're so relentlessly pursued by dragon hunters, they make a point of changing their sleeping location as often as possible, so as not to make things any easier for their pursuers. Phew…

I have a thick layer of scales, so I barely noticed the books beneath me, even when I lay down to rest on top of an entire library, shelves and all. Not even when I tossed and turned violently. You should know that I have a rather restless sleep due to chronic nightmares. Well, it was inevitable that a few books would occasionally get wedged between my scales like food stuck between teeth. I pegged my "My body was literally covered in the staves when I threw myself around in them, it was simply unavoidable!" Nathaviel cleared his throat audibly and continued: "And then there were also these animatomes…"

"There are actually animatomes down here?" I interrupted the dragon.

"Of course there are some here," Nathaviel replied. "They live in many areas of the catacombs. Every now and then, they swarm around me in huge numbers. Some even become so intrusive that they nest on me and become firmly attached."

The Scale Books

ramatically, the yellowish glow in the bookling's cyclopean eye intensified, from which I concluded that his story affected him at least as much as it affected me.

The dragon groaned, raised his right forepaw, and examined his claws, "At first, I felt uncomfortable walking around with books in my shell; I felt unkempt. Each morning, I'd spend a lot of time wrestling books out with my claws and teeth, but it became more and more of a nuisance. And who around here cares how I look, when the only ones who see me are parasitic swamp creatures? Nobody! Besides, I didn't want to degenerate into a vain house cat that spends most of its pointless existence on excessive grooming.

"Don't get me wrong—dragons are clean animals, not swamp pigs! But they're not cleaning fanatics or cuddly kittens either. So after a while, I began ignoring the slabs of paper stuck between the scales, trusting that they would crumble on their own. Or fall out. Which they did, for the most part. The rest—the really solidly made books—rotted only very slowly, and new ones appeared every night I spent camping. Eventually, I stopped caring. Whether they fell out or

stayed stuck, rotted away or adorned me for a thousand years, it didn't matter. This was simply my new personal aesthetic.

"My scales began to secrete a resinous substance that coated and sealed the books with a transparent skin. It didn't look half bad, I thought! I considered it ornamentation, since some of the books were decorated with gold fittings, pearls, silver inlays, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones.

"Soon, all that leather, paper, metal, and dried scale resin had doubled my body weight. Like an onion, layer upon layer accumulated, and I became ever more voluminous and cumbersome. If I had attempted to fly with this ballast of books on my ribs, the result would have been laughable!"

Nathaviel grinned. "As I mentioned at the beginning," he continued, "I was once a kind of bird. A creature of the air. Traveling among the clouds, between the mountain peaks. Hard to believe, isn't it? Now, I'm the most grounded creature imaginable. Let's face it: I'm completely bloated! If I tried to march back through the catacombs the way I came in, I'd get stuck every other turn, guaranteed. The books have condemned me to a sedentary existence.

"Before I knew it, I'd become a prisoner of the Orm Swamp. Without thinking, I'd shut the door myself and thrown away the key. It didn't happen overnight, of course—we're talking about a very long time, my friend! Shhh… Years. Decades. Centuries, it seems to me. I stopped counting, but at some point, I became a completely different dragon. Outwardly and inwardly, for even as my scales transformed, so did my inner self. My old consciousness was sifted through a sieve that allowed only the useful elements to pass through, while the unpleasant memories and bad habits were filtered out. In their place, exciting new thoughts and unusual ideas accumulated daily."

The dragon tilted his head and looked at me. "Well, that's nothing unusual, is it? This sort of thing happens in most young minds, and young was what I was back then. I grew up down here.

"It was almost frightening, the speed and abundance with which the new thoughts and ideas gathered within me. At least they came regularly, and I always had these inspirations early in the morning, immediately after waking up—as if I'd spent the night secretly attending night school. Let me be clear: the ideas that came to my were not my own! They contained knowledge I could not possible have—highly complex, exhausting, diverse, and completely obscure stuff. But from where did these thoughts come? And why? That the books of the swamp might be the cause—well, I'd suspected that for a while. But how could such a thing be? I couldn't read them, which was why I'd ignored them before.

"Now, however, in addition to causing the ideas, I suspected the books had something to do with the growing turmoil in my ears. More than that, the books were slowly becoming eerie. The constant crackling of the vermin eating them was hardly a pleasant sound. Their morbid decay is hardly a pretty sight. They're corpses, you see? Carcasses. Skeletons. And they were everywhere.

"Had there always been so many? Had the magma washed in new ones? Yes, every day they multiplied and became more menacing and intrusive, like lice or disease-ridden rats. Why not brain disease, too? And there was I, tossing and turning in them every night. Hhhh..." The dragon's voice had taken on a tremulous, fearful quality, which made it sound thinner than before. I had almost forgotten that he was a ravenous monster!

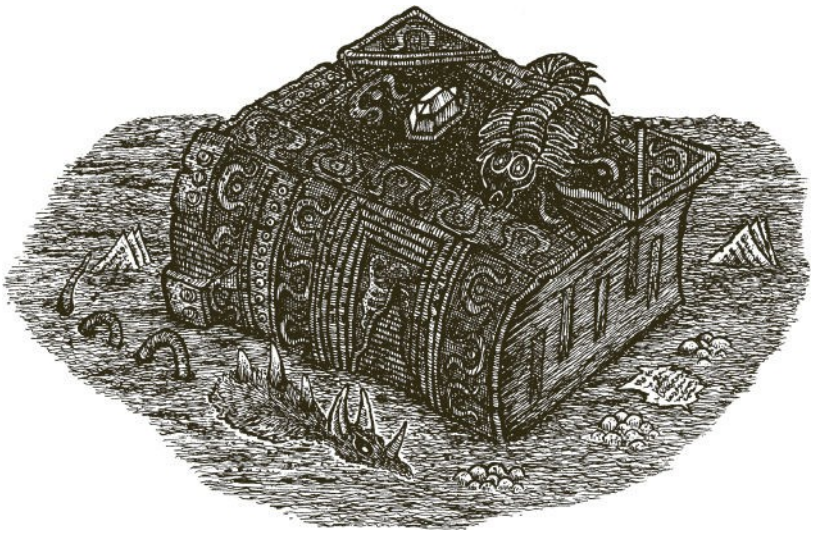
"These fears might explain my gut reaction the day I stumbled over a particularly hefty tome rotting in the peat. I wanted to stomp it even deeper into the bog with an angry kick, but then I stopped. I hovered my foot over it. Something about the book—perhaps its precious cover with the gold fittings, perhaps the magnificent ornamental embossing in the old leather—prevented me from destroying it.

"*Should I open it to see if its artistic design continues inside?* That was

definitely the first time such an adventurous thought had ever crossed my mind. To examine it more closely, to leaf through it—how absurd! I might as well voluntarily dig through a cowpat!

"But then, unusual ideas weren't exactly new to me these days. *Fine!*

"A little hesitantly, I followed my impulse. With one claw, I gingerly opened the cover—acting slightly disgusted, of course, because that was my general attitude toward these pointless bricks of paper. An attitude I didn't intend to abandon, either.



"*Ugh...*I leafed through the ancient tome with exaggerated listlessness and boredom, as if my actions might otherwise ruin my reputation. The pages were reasonably intact and not too damp, and indeed, completely uninteresting. *Ugh, nothing but yellowed paper with endless rows of dark stains like dried and squashed ants.* The catacombs were crammed to the last nook and cranny with this garbage. What a waste of space! I lowered my dragon head and looked suspiciously at the small symbols. I was being condescending in the truest sense of

the word.

"*Well, they aren't squashed ants, but…but…hmm…wait a minute!* To my astonishment, I found that I could decipher the symbols! That was an A, wasn't it? This one an M. And that one a Z, without a doubt. Ssss…! Even though I hadn't even known what letters were before, let alone been able to distinguish between them, I could *read these symbols!*

"I was so surprised that I backed away from the book and stared at it as if it had bitten me. Then I stepped closer again and examined it more closely. Incredibly, I could decipher the entire text on the page, even though it was written in Old Zamonian. A script that—as I later learned—is usually only mastered by scholars, students, and other eccentrics.

"As far as the contents, it was a tedious text on some obscure, specialized area of publishing law. *If a writer lived to be seven hundred, do the rights to their works remain with their heirs for seven hundred years after their death, or can the publisher dispose of them after just one hundred years?* Something like that; it was a work for specialists.

"I then examined other books rotting away around me. And to my astonishment, I discovered that I could read them all!

"That day and in the following weeks, I examined almost every book I could get my hands. I noticed, to my growing delight, that I could decipher not only books in Zamonian and Old Zamonian, but those in Ancient Zamonian, Middle High Zamonian, Yhollisian, Bhuggtu, and other non-Zamonian languages. I had become a scholar overnight. Ffff…"

Hildegunst Two paused briefly in his story and seemed distracted. I feared the bookworm would interrupt his account, but then he suddenly sat up, looked intently at me with his shining eye, and continued.

As the Book Dragon told me his story, the Orm Swamp became increasingly lively. This place seemed to follow a regular cycle of day

and night, which I could observe through the activity of the plants and animals. More and more plants unfurled their leaves and opened their blossoms; others shone brighter or slowly sank into the swamp; still others rose to the surface. The animals, too, became more active and noisier. Frogs croaked louder, crickets sawed more frantically, swarms of mosquitoes buzzed up and hummed ever more intrusively around me. It was hard to say whether this was dawn or dusk—but something was definitely happening. Which, by the way, didn't exactly improve my state of mind! I was particularly bothered by the flying creatures. The dragon, however, seemed completely unaffected by it all.

"Was I even still a dragon?" he wondered, his tone dramatic. "Or had I transformed into a new form of existence? Within a single life cycle! That was surely unique."

"Not quite!" I interrupted the dragon impudently. "It's not that unique. There's another animal species that can do that too. Apparently, there are flying insects on the surface of Zamonia called butterflies." I'd heard about them in class at the Leather Grotto. "And they transform into another life form while they're still alive. Into, uh, caterpillars."

"It's the other way around," sighed the dragon, looking at me in a way I found hard to interpret. "Caterpillars turn into butterflies, not butterflies into caterpillars. But that's a good point, my little one-eyed friend. From it, you can appreciate what an extraordinary and rare process this is in nature. One creature transforming into another—an event otherwise reserved only for butterflies! Er, I mean: caterpillars. A miracle. I really should be given a new genus name."

"You already have loads of names," I pointed out. "*Book Dragon*, for example."

Nathaviel shook his head. "Yes…well…that's rather unimaginative, don't you think? Just *book* slapped onto *dragon*. How lazy. Book Dragon—that sounds like the name of a children's bookstore." He

snorted contemptuously.

I had to laugh. "That's right!" I said.

"Hey!" Nathaviel grinned. "You've got a great sense of humor, little one. I wouldn't have expected that from you."

"Thank you very much," I said. And I think I blushed a little while saying it.

"Humor is important!" Nathaviel lectured, raising his paw. "There's a fine line between melancholy and despair. The paper-thin bulwark that protects us from falling into the abyss, into the terrible nothingness…is humor. And the darker the humor, the better it works. Believe me!" He lowered his paw again.

"So: suddenly there were all these thoughts. These ideas, these words in my brain that I hadn't known before. Wonderful words like *rhythm* and *showstopper. Euphoria* and *hypothetical. Eureka* and *wanderlust.* Words that made me pensive and sad, like *jaded* or *finitude.* And there were also some that made me laugh, like *quixotic, indulgent, imponderable,* and *lubricate.* All these exquisite words suddenly belonged to my vocabulary. As did the word *vocabulary* itself. A precious treasure of words: *filigree. Rubicund. Lively. Melancholy. Variegated. Grace. Distinctive. Boyish. Solitude. Chime. Untimely. Distress. Tolerance. Gem. Compassion. Subtlety. Goosebumps. Security. Trouble. Dew. Icicle. Snow flurry. Mercy. Twilight. Illusion. Grumpiness. Resentment. Secretly. Otherworldly. Hangover. Grumpy. Thunderstorm. Flawless. Undaunted. Inspired. Vanity. Nevermore. Nap. Musical. Fluttery. Impetuous. Whirlwind. Affection. Moment. Stuffed. Care. Patience. Graceful. Troublemaker. Perplexed. Obligation. Nonsense. Dizzy. Friendship*. These words were now piled up in my brain like gold bars. But where on earth did they come from? And what I found even more mysterious: I knew the meanings of all these terms! Did you know that the primordial element from which all elements originated is called *Ylem*? Or that if you're *blanched,* then you're paler than pale. Namely, dead, you understand? And is there a better word than

miasma for the Orm Swamp's atmosphere? I could go on forever. Did you know that the flowers drunken men bring their wives to appease them are called *dragon food* in certain regions of Zamonia? Well, I find that funny, at least. Ha! Or that the ancient inhabitants of Atlantis had public spaces where one could vomit after overly lavish feasts, which were called *vomitariums*? I suddenly knew things like that, just like that!"

The dragon flicked his claws, making a sound reminiscent of two flints being rubbed together. "Without having the slightest clue where this knowledge came from. I knew, for example, that there is such a thing as collective egoism, called *solidarititis,* although that's an oxymoron. It's the force that drives, say, a military special forces unit or the crew of a rowing boat. It's a mild and temporary form of madness: for a short time, you believe you are several people at once. Or rather, several people think they are one and the same person. It's particularly common among soldiers. Ssss..."

The dragon tapped his forehead with his paw. "Such specialized knowledge was suddenly in my skull! Heaps of it. And it kept growing! Words coalesced into sentences. Sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into chapters. Letters became stories, characters, destinies, landscapes, continents. Chronicles of family feuds and battles. There were also the most precise descriptions of quite ordinary things: chairs, marketplaces, cloudbursts. Always impeccably worded. There were individual sentences that resonated particularly long, like echoes; they lit up like flaming writing when I closed my eyes. For example: *"Glory is fleeting, but obscurity is forever."* [5] Or: *As long as you speak fluently, it doesn't matter what you say.* Or: *A bird in the hand is worth a poisoned arrow in the eye.*"

Nathaviel laughed. "Such wisdoms accumulated in my brain every

[5] English Translation: Commonly attributed to Napoleon Boneparte. See also Marcus Aurelius: "All things are ephemeral—fame and the famous as well."

morning. Were they aphorisms? Cliches? Crazy ideas? I have no idea; call them what you will! In any case, these sentences were here to stay. I haven't forgotten them to this day: *Fate is what happens to you while you're making other plans.*[6] Or: *The average time after which you desperately need something you've just thrown away is two weeks.* Or: *You should only shave if you have a beard."*

The dragon grinned. "What would I do with this nonsense? I don't even have hair, let alone a beard. But it's meant metaphorically, of course. Or how about this: *If a little is great, and a lot is better, then way too much is just about right!*[7] Think about it! But I like this sentence even better: *Never sleep in the same coffin like a vampire!* You really can't argue with that! Golden words. Or: *Everyone can forgive your sins, except your own body.* Eternal truths like these crowded into my skull: *There's no second chance to make a first impression.* Who could disagree with that? Not me! My favorite sentence for a long time was this one: *You can suck blood from a bat too."*

Nathaviel laughed for a long time, then became serious again. "Well, I know hundreds of these luminous sentences. Thousands. Each one better than the last. A real improvement on the beautiful words, because they possess meaning. The words were the crumbs; the sentences were the cookies; the connected sentences made a whole cake. Do you understand? Because increasingly larger quantities of words were going through my head. Sometimes completely insane stuff, the meaning of which I couldn't grasp at first, whose mere rhythm and melody fascinated and enchanted me. Words like songs! Language like music! All in my skull."

The dragon bent down very close to me and whispered: "Have you ever seen or experienced anything so beautiful that it made you cry? The burning mists at the Fire Falls of Florinth? The death dances of the will-o'-the-wisps in the ruby grottoes beneath the source of Mag-

[6] English Translation: John Lennon, "Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)"
[7] English Translation: Mae West

mass? The crystal harmonies that breathe into your ear in the glass-wind drifts and slice your heart into tiny pieces with glass daggers? Yes indeed, my little friend: There is an intermediate realm between beauty and pain, which is called *melancholy*. Such a beautiful word, too; it sounds like a sick flower! You may not have experienced it yet, because you are very young. But back then, here in the Orm Swamp, the realm of melancholy became my new home. Whoever has once learned to be at home in melancholy can endure even the worst of all possible worlds. Good reading, dark humor, and healthy, well-aged melancholy—that's really all you need. And now and then a few swamp frog legs, and life is largely bearable. Ssss…"

Nathaviel's breath blew directly into my face again. And this time it smelled exactly like certain areas of the Leather Grotto. Namely, where we keep the particularly old, valuable, and richly textured books. *The stimulating scent of old leather and the tang of printer's ink.* That's how you described it in your book, too.

Hildegunst Two was right. I could only vaguely remember it, but the bookling's quote was certainly correct down to the last letter.

The Book Dragon had slumped down beside me during his story and was now lying on his stomach with his front paws crossed,

relaxed and nonchalant like a huge, fat predator after its supper. He was contemplatively gazing at the claws of his right paw, and I even thought I could hear a faint purr. I gradually relaxed a little.

"Well, it was still inexplicable to me how all that stuff found its way into my skull," Nathaviel continued. "Although I had a hunch, of course, ever since I started reading books myself. Which, after my initial enthusiasm, I didn't do all that often anymore. I have to admit that. I found it rather strenuous. Not the mental act—the *physical* act of reading. It's completely unnatural for us! Books simply aren't made for dragons. And vice versa. That's just how it is, let's be honest! Even the proportions are off. Hhhh…"

Nathaviel fished a book out of the swamp and held it up with sharp claws to illustrate his point. It looked as if he had picked the remains of a dead rat out of the mud. Then he let the book plop back into the mire, where it sank with a gurgle. "To read these tiny things, I have to strain so much that I get sore eyes. After a dozen pages, I have a headache; and after a whole book, I can't see straight. Everything doubles. That's not sustainable in the long run. We need either bigger books or smaller dragons. Ffff…"

Nathaviel raised his forebody again and stretched his head upwards. The fog had collapsed into a cottony blanket that only reached my knees but deceptively concealed the swamp all around.

"The sheer volume of my new thoughts sometimes made me think I was losing my mind. But I suppose that's how it is for most people who are seriously studying. I became whiny and hypochondriacal. Shhh… When you have an upset stomach, you sometimes fear the worst, even if the cause is just overeating. On the other hand, if I *did* lose my mind, it was in a decidedly pleasant and entertaining way. The best thing about this inexplicable tumult in my brain was that it banished not only my chronic boredom but also the dark moods that had always poisoned my life. The gloomy moods were still there, but now they were miraculously overlaid, displaced by a constantly

swelling cacophony of voices, by a lively and gossipy chorus of minds. My brain was more lively than a town hall, an insane asylum, or a beehive. Monologues and dialogues. Fiery speeches and pleas. Sharp-tongued verbal sparring, eulogies, and entire speeches swirled through my skull. Like a convention of professional windbags, where I myself had the honor of presiding. At first, I spent entire days, weeks, months almost exclusively trudging aimlessly through the swamp, trying to follow the wordy chaos in my head as attentively as possible—sometimes closing me eyes for hours, for the sake of concentration. I must have looked like a sleepwalker or a lunatic, the way I staggered about, as blind as an owl in sunlight, disoriented through mud and fog, babbling away to myself and occasionally bursting into hysterical laughter. Ffff...

"I was so engrossed that I often forgot to eat and sleep for so long that when I roused, half-starved, I would devour the nearest bioluminescent jellyfish or marsh toad and then collapse, utterly exhausted. Other times, I ate nothing but peat melons, because they grow everywhere.

"I gradually learned to distinguish the voices in my head and recognize them in different contexts. This was a step up from dully brooding over eating and drinking, hunting and killing subordinate life forms—the vegetative existence from day to day that had previously defined my monotonous life. But it wasn't real independent thought—not yet. My head was simply filling up with more and more raw material that had to be painstakingly deciphered and organized. And by no means was everything that trickled into my skull day after day of value. A lot had to be weeded out. Sometimes, I was simply overwhelmed with thoughts of unspeakable banality and shallowness. And it took quite some time to suppress them and forget them again. So it wasn't as if my knowledge simply fell into my lap, you see? I had to contribute my share. That was work. While the muscles and tendons in my legs and wings grew increasingly weak

and atrophied from lack of movement, the convoluted thinking muscle behind my forehead swelled day by day. Whereas I had spent the previous years almost exclusively hunting live prey, I now hunted for the kind of food that was incorporeal and had to be digested mentally."

Nathaviel grinned at me. "At some point, my brain became so swollen with ideas that I imagined I could split mountains with my thoughts. If I'd previously been afraid of going insane, now I couldn't get enough of these crazy ideas. Or perhaps I had become megalomaniacal because of them. Before, I'd pushed aside every difficult thought in any way I could. Sometimes, to divert blood from my thinking organ, I'd filled my stomach with tunnel rats to digest. This had effectively stifled my mental activity in its infancy. Other times, I'd taken a nap to distract my brain and slept for a whole week straight. You can dream away any problem. But now, I preferred to be hungry and wide awake!

"The truth was, these new thoughts filled the mental vacuum that had been the true cause of my restlessness for so many years. I had finally found a substitute for my restlessness and gluttony. I could let my thoughts fly; I could dream with my eyes open, fully conscious. And these dreams weren't tormenting nightmares in which I devoured myself from the tail down but lightning-fast and fearless dreams—seemingly endless thought experiments that made sense and led to solutions to my problems. Solutions that were useful.

"So this was *thinking!* Not just following one instinctive impulse after another, but determining, organizing, and shaping my own life! I was becoming *intelligent.* No, I didn't become *clever* right away, nor *wise* —that came later—but I underwent a gradual transformation from a primal animal to a doubting, rational being. One good idea a day is enough in the long run to fill even the emptiest head." The dragon grinned. "And one morning, when I woke up, there it was. This thing in my head."

"A thing? In your head?" I shuddered. "What do you mean by that? Surely not an illness?"

"No, no," Nathaviel protested, laughing—to my great relief. "This thing was a conglomeration of words. A text. It was, how should I say it. It was… uh…"

"You mean—it was literature?"

"Exactly. Literature. You could say that. It had an astonishing quality. It wasn't just a few brilliant sentences that had happened to come together. It was a real story, and it was bursting with the Orm. I didn't have to do a thing. The story came to me like…well, like a child comes a woman."

The dragon laughed again. "I explain it to myself like this: my scale books caused it. Instead of my metabolism just extracting beautiful words or luminous sentences, it had pulled out a coherent story of the highest literary merit." The dragon suddenly seemed to be thinking hard. "Tell me, do you happen to know the book *The City of Dreaming Books*?"

"I do, and not by chance!" I replied proudly. "That is a book by Hildegunst von Mythenmetz. I memorize his complete works and therefore bear his name."

I hadn't expected to find myself (or, rather, one of my works) featured in the bookling's story. I was understandably taken aback, but I was careful not to interrupt the bookling's narration. I was too deeply interested in finding out what happened next!

Hildegunst Two continued,

"Oh," said the dragon. "That's quite fateful. *The City of Dreaming Books* is among my scale books, so I know its contents almost verbatim. To make a long story short: In this book, as you know, Mythenmetz finds a manuscript teeming with the Orm. His description of it reminded me of the quality of the story that was now in my head. Mythenmetz describes it like this: *My first thought was that every word was in the right place.… The characters, each of them a work of*

art in its own right, were choreographed across the page like an enchanting ballet.... The cold emanating from them made me shiver, but it wasn't the mundane frigidity of ice: it was the grand, exalted, eternal chill of outer space."

"*That was creative thought and writing in its purest form*," I finished the quote effortlessly from memory: "*I had never read anything even half as immaculate*."

"Exactly!" cried the dragon. "Those were Mythenmetz's words—and they were also my thoughts when faced with this perfect text."

"What was the story about?" I asked the dragon excitedly.

"I can easily tell you that," the dragon replied with a smile. "I still have them all in here." The dragon tapped his temple with a claw. "But we'll get to that later, my little friend."

He cleared his throat. "A revolution took place in my skull. The rational parts of my brain gradually took over my body, over all my habits. I had long since stopped eating everything that moved, because I got far more pleasure from conversing with living beings than from chewing on them. Especially since those that can speak simply don't taste good—that's a good rule of thumb. Especially virgins. There was plenty of food in the swamp anyway. It didn't have to have legs, wings, or fins. Leaves and roots would do just fine. I practically became a vegetarian." The dragon gestured expansively across the fog-shrouded swamp.

The Ormacle

Hildesgunst Two allowed himself a brief respite, although the gleam in his eye reached a level I had never before seen in a bookling. It was almost frightening. Then he continued:

"Simultaneously with my newfound mental flexibility, my solitary habits seemed to diminish," the dragon said. "I developed a growing interest in exchanging ideas. Not everything one can learn is found in books. Besides, a tormenting pressure had built up in my narrow skull, like a boiling pot with a stuck lid. Perhaps *need to communicate* is the right phrase. I became sociable. I wanted to talk with someone. So I chatted all my visitors up and down and only then let them go—that was new! And significant. Because in time, word got around that there was a by-no-means malevolent dragon living in the Orm Swamp, not a devourer of all living things, oh, no, but rather an astonishingly cultured and resourceful giant lizard with whom one could have splendid conversations! One that not only listened attentively but also had something to say. Yes, one who even possessed a sensational encyclopedic knowledge. And one who used it freely and generously. Shhhh...!

"It wasn't long before more and more daring and curious people started coming here. At first, the usual adventurers and gold diggers, the suicidal and other eccentrics. But then more and more people who were free from greed—if you consider curiosity and a thirst for knowledge not *greed*. And finally, scientists and other educated people with genuine interest came, including specialists, cryptozoologists and cave biologists, book enthusiasts and bibliosophists. The conversations became more intense, the topics more demanding and specialized, the visitors' academic degrees ever more impressive. I could easily keep up with most of them in terms of general knowledge; for many, I was far superior. I was continually astonished by what I myself possessed. Whether I wanted it or not, I had become a medium, a bottleneck for the spirits of bygone eras and sunken cultures. I had specialized knowledge in a wide variety of fields. Knowledge, some of it long since lost, from the most remote areas. Only much later did I understand that it was the Orm that was speaking through me."

The dragon angled his head towards me again and lowered his voice confidentially. "And when the Orm wasn't speaking through me—which certainly happened—I found it wiser to say nothing at all than to struggle for words and spout nonsense. Do you understand? Silence really is sometimes golden.

"I soon fell into the habit of shrouding myself in mysterious reticence during these instances of acute Orm-block. And I conducted the conversations with monosyllabic thoughtfulness. Did you know that you can handle even the most demanding discussion with four simple half-sentences? These sentences go like this: First, *'Hmnn, yes...*' second, *'Hmnn, no...*' third, *'Hmnn, hahaha...*' and fourth, *'Hmnn... I'll have to think about that...*'"

Nathaviel gave me his insolent dragon grin again. "That's all you need, believe me! Most humanities scholars much prefer the sound of themselves rambling on anyway. The important thing is to make the

'*Hmnn...*' sound as absentminded as possible every time. Ffff...

"That's how I gradually gained a reputation as an all-knowing oracle. A marvel of stature and knowledge, possessing answers to everything. Not having met me personally was considered an embarrassing gap in one's education and a social stigma, especially if you were among the leading figures in the catacombs. You risked getting a reputation for being out of touch, poorly advised, and backward. And hardly anyone can afford that; not even a despot wants to be accused of such things.

"Meeting me was like gaining a doctorate or a professorship. Your standing rose if you solved a problem with my help, and my own reputation automatically rose as well. No one could lose in a meeting with the oracle! I became the number one tourist attraction in the catacombs, even more so than the Rusty Gnomes' book train. The swamp became the most popular pilgrimage site in the labyrinths; it teemed with people. It's hard to believe when you look around here today." Nathaviel cast a wistful glance at the mist-shrouded landscape, from which only limp plants and isolated moss-covered stalagmites and peat-gourd trees rose.

"Powerful book lords and notorious book pirates came here seeking my advice. Can you imagine *Ylan Ureff the Jaundiced* standing there with a bucket full of diamonds? Asking me how to outmaneuver his scheming Minister of Justice? They consulted me primarily on political matters, but often even on very personal ones. Incidentally, my answers benefited not only from the Orm, but also from my life experience. I had traveled through the dimly lit caverns of the Underworld as well as the sun-drenched landscapes of the Aboveworld. I had even journeyed through the skies above the Zamonian continent. I knew what the moon, the clouds, and the sea looked like—who else down here could say that? Hardly anyone had traveled as widely as I had. Who else had known so much about the geographical connections of Zamonia, both in the Aboveworld and

the Underworld, so many peoples and cultures? And who had destroyed so many of them? Shhhh…

"No, all joking aside: I like to think I gave some pretty good advice back then. Although my memories of that are unfortunately fading. Of course, I also talked a load of nonsense. You know, the kind of stuff you say when you're young and arrogant: *Do this! Do that! Don't do this! Do that instead! Wash your feet five times a day!*

"The Yellow Dwarfs of the Lower Catacombs probably still eat a candle with every meal because I once gave that advice to their chief. Just for fun! I have no idea where I got the nerve to tell princes and kings, chiefs and viziers, entire tribes and peoples, what they should be doing in matters I often didn't have the slightest clue about! I just did it. Thinking about it now makes me break out in a sweat! Ugh…

"Well—the Orm spoke through me, didn't it? The Orm sanctifies all words, right? So I wasn't really responsible for my cheeky remarks, was I? It was the Orm! Haha! Let's blame it on the Orm! I wasn't just an oracle; I was the very embodiment of the Orm." Nathaviel laughed heartily. "Regardless, it was certainly an exciting time. Everyone wanted something from me. While that's not a state that's conducive to mental health in the long run, it's a thrilling experience to be the center of attention for a while. To have enjoyed that privilege, well, shhhh… I wouldn't want to miss it! It was kind of exhilarating. You live life twice, three times over, so to speak. You're burning at both ends. You can't imagine what it was like here back then! People flocked to the Orm Swamp; it was like a fairground. Quite a few visitors brought tents and set them up. They camped and stayed overnight here, queuing for days just to be able to ask me their burning questions: *How do I resolve the border conflict with the half-dead Reading Monks, Nathaviel? What am I going to do about my scheming mother-in-law? Should I risk a raid on the Petrified Library of the Volcano Gnomes? How many years do I have left, Great Oracle?* Ssss…

"And so on and so forth. Incredibly, I had a lid for every pot, a key

for every lock, a remedy for every ailment. In the form of spontaneous answers that might be a) absolutely clear, b) rather vague, or c) totally cryptic—depending on my mood and whether the Orm was flowing or not. If not, I'd just spout some enigmatic nonsense. Like, *'A snail without a shell is like a tiger without stripes.'* I left the poor seekers of advice to rack their brains over it for the rest of their lives. Shhhhh... The crucial thing was that I never failed to provide an answer. You see? Never be at a loss for advice! That's the only way to gain a reputation for absolute infallibility. Chutzpah wins. Not always, but quite often.

"My visitors lugged down food, souvenirs, and precious gifts. Poets brought their own books and read their effusions to me. A king once gave me his crown! I must still have the thing somewhere. I received offers to serve as an advisor at the courts of powerful principalities in the Underworld. I was offered ministerial posts. Scribes recorded my pronouncements and then disseminated them in the catacombs. Ssss..."

"Uh... May I ask something?" I interrupted Hildegunst Two's story spontaneously. "How can you remember so many details after all this time? Did the dragon really say all that? Exactly like that? Or just something similar? How accurate is your memory?"

"Oh," said the bookling, "it's, well, pretty accurate. It's not the *exact* wording, of course. It's not exactly the same words in the absolutely correct order either. But almost."

"Almost? What do you mean by *almost? Almost* the same words in *almost* the right order? That would still be amazingly accurate."

"Well, that's what we bookworms are good at. The one thing at which we're truly masters: remembering texts. We can literally memorize better than any other Zamonian being. That's why we're able to memorize entire works by poets flawlessly and retain them forever. Most people believe they can remember the books they've read well, but that's just an illusion. They forget most of the book as

soon as they close it. We booklings, on the other hand, read a book only once—and then never forget it. And it's the same with other memories related to language, words, and text. We forget nothing.

I sighed. "I wish I had a memory like that. It would make my work so much easier."

"Are you sure?" asked Hildegunst Two. "The meaning and beauty of your writing lies in replacing mere memory with something else. Otherwise, you might as well be a mathematician. We bookworms are memory machines; you are a poet. We remember something old, something that existed long ago; you create the new. We reproduce; you create. Uh…does that answer your questions? Can I continue now?"

"Of course!" I said. "Sorry to interrupt."

"That's alright. I'm sorry; it's a long story, and I'd like to be finished with it sometime. But the best is yet to come." Hildegunst Two took a deep breath.

"So," said the dragon, "then the thing with the scale happened, and that changed everything. A single scale from my shell—hard to believe, isn't it? I might still be a popular and much-consulted oracle today, if not… Shhh… if not that one cursed day, a few damned scholars asked me if they could have one of my book scales for their scientific investigations and experiments. They were bookish scholars, I think, from the Middle Catacombs. This was long ago. Anyway, I was flattered: I was to be scientifically analyzed—who gets that kind of treatment? And just one scale? A single one? I had plenty of those things on my body. Actually, always far too many.

It wasn't a major surgical procedure, no more complicated or painful than, say, popping a pimple. I'd done it myself from time to time, just for fun. So I granted their request. They were allowed to remove a thick book, which they considered particularly potent because of its title and author, from my scales. I also allowed them to take the small amount of blood that flowed as a sample. They left to examine every-

thing in their laboratories and conduct a few experiments.

"It wasn't long before they returned, excitedly reporting astonishing results. They had dried the scale book, electroplated it, measured it, weighed it, and who knows what else. Then they ground it into powder. They dissolved the powder in alcohol, ether, and zillobim. Then they mixed these solutions together again. In subsequent experiments on test subjects, they discovered that even the smallest dose of this substance was sufficient to induce a tremendous Orm-like state in certain individuals, leading to the spontaneous writing of entire novel cycles, the quality of which was said to be extraordinary. And this occurred, in part, with subjects who previously couldn't even read or write. 'The Orm is just roaring in my blood,' they claimed."

Hildegunst Two waved his hands, probably to illustrate the dragon's excitement. I nodded understandingly. "The Orm," I said. "It leaves no one indifferent."

The bookling continued his tale:

"Do you understand?" said Nathaviel. "That was the solution to the great mystery! The rational and scientifically sound explanation for my miraculous transformation! Official confirmation, so to speak, of a suspicion I had long harbored: The Orm was at work! It had entered my bloodstream and my thoughts from the minds of poets, via books. I was not mad or megalomaniacal or ill in any way, but merely infected by the Orm. The books had been there all along, so I would feel less lonely. That's what books are for, after all. And because I'd been too stupid to find my way to them—to read them—they'd had to find their way to me."

"They had gotten under your skin," I interjected.

"Exactly," said the dragon. "Literally! And then into my blood and finally into my head. It was good and reassuring to know what had happened. But still: I should have buried those damned scientists right there in the swamp. On the spot. Along with their sensational

news."

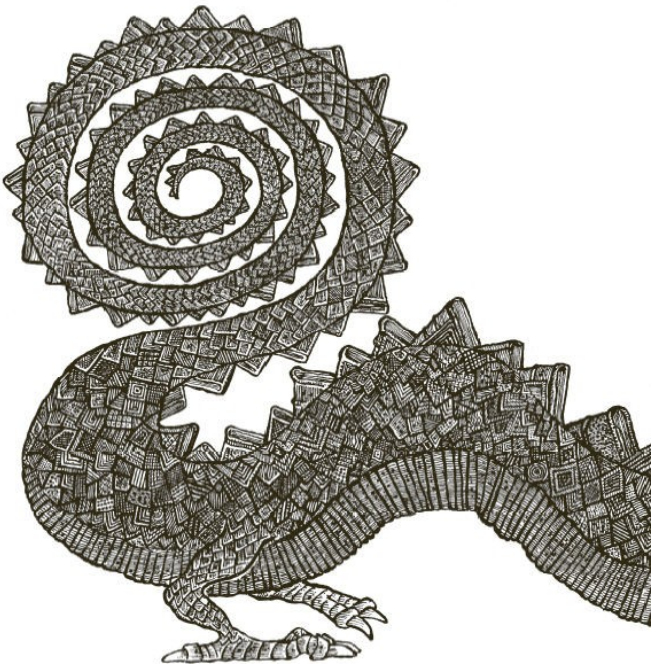
"Why is that?" I asked the dragon.

"For good reason! I should have potted them upside down, then there would have been peace and quiet. But no—I was so proud of my damned Orm-scales that I let them go, and they spread the word everywhere. That's really where all the trouble started." Nathaviel groaned.

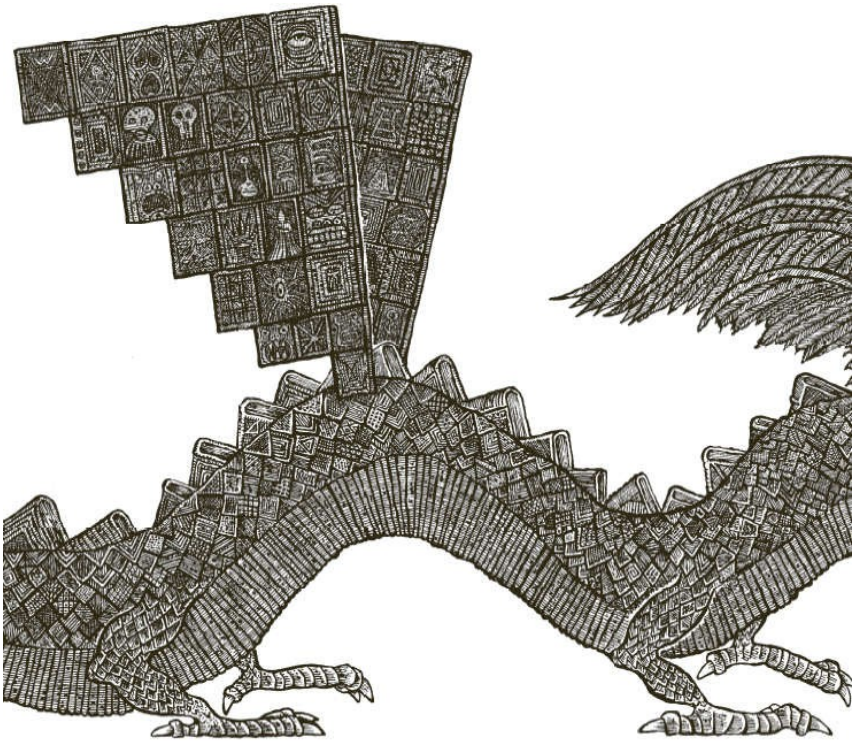
"Trouble? In what way?"

"Can't you imagine? It led to a plague of new visitors. Have you ever heard of the diamond fever on the coast of Ornien? When they discovered a type of shell there in which emeralds grew? Well, what happened in Ornien back then was nothing compared to what happened in the Orm Swamp. Everyone wanted to beg for scales from me, the famous Orm Dragon. Or buy them with money. Or earn them as gifts. Worst of all, steal them. Do you understand? In the minds of the catacomb inhabitants, I had become a walking treasure trove. My popularity and the value of my armor had risen dramatically, astronomically. One scale of my skin could generate dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Orm-infused books. It could turn illiterate people into successful poets. Poets into millionaires. Publishers into princes."

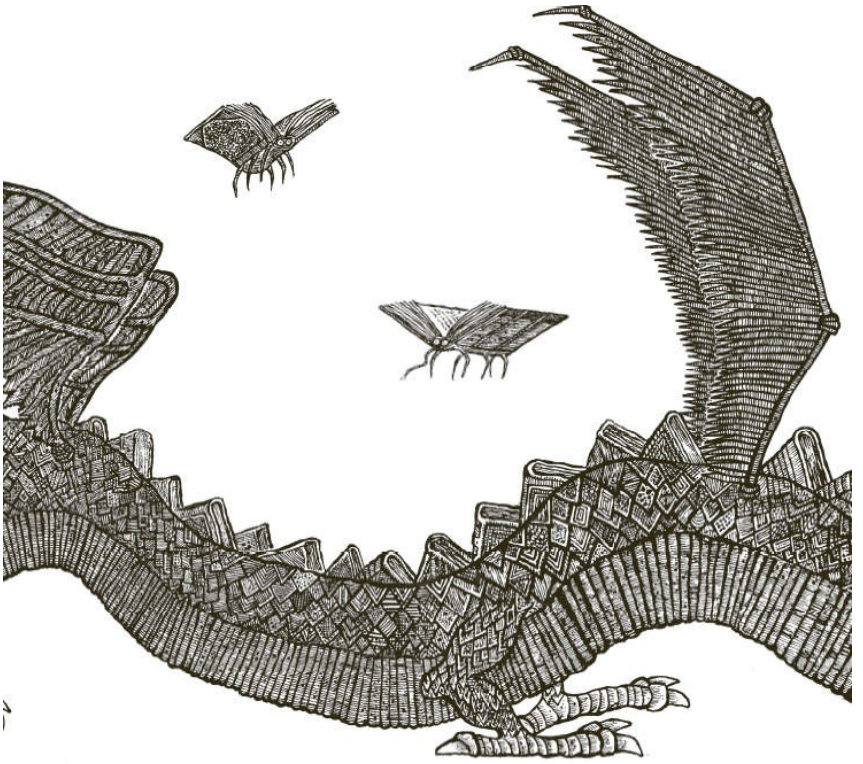
"I understand."



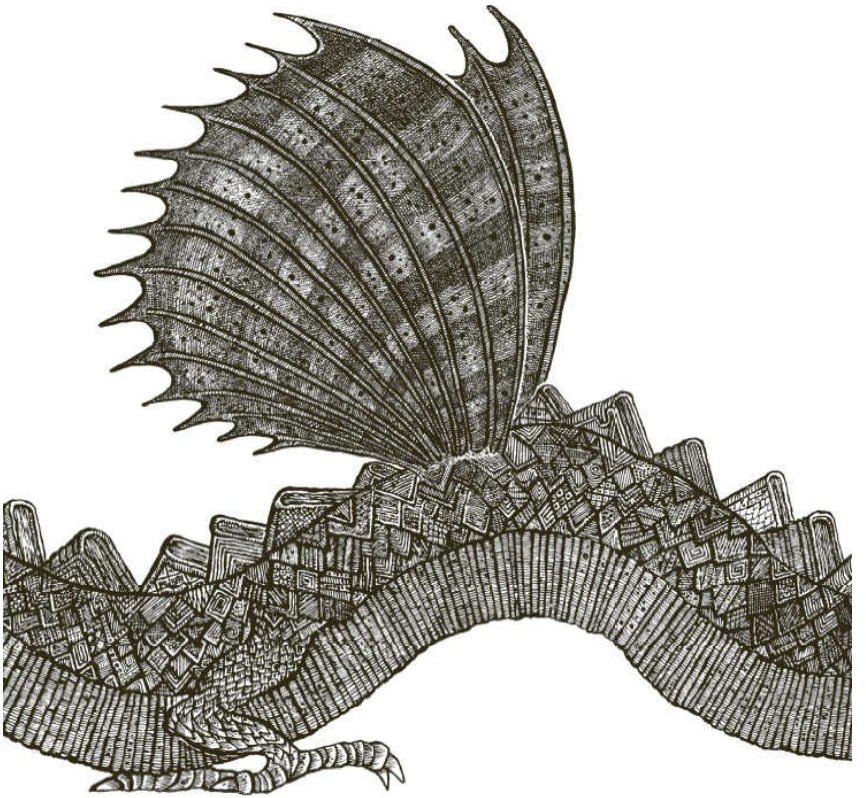
"Yes, I had transformed myself once again. First I mutated from a dragon into an oracle, now from an oracle into a golden goose. Each of my scales was worth a fortune, and I possessed thousands of them. In the fantasies of the underworld dwellers, I was now not only a being with dozens of different wings and hundreds of legs, but also with tens of thousands of scales made of precious books.



"Whoever skinned me would become the richest dragon- and bookhunter of all time. I had fled deep into the bowels of Zamonia, but fate had caught up with me and multiplied my bounty! And this time, I wasn't just being hunted by a few lumbering knights, but by every bookhunter and adventurer in the catacombs. I had become the most coveted treasure in the Underworld. Worth more than all books on the Golden List. Imagine a treasure coveted by every pirate on every sea. The ship on which that treasure was located—that was me."

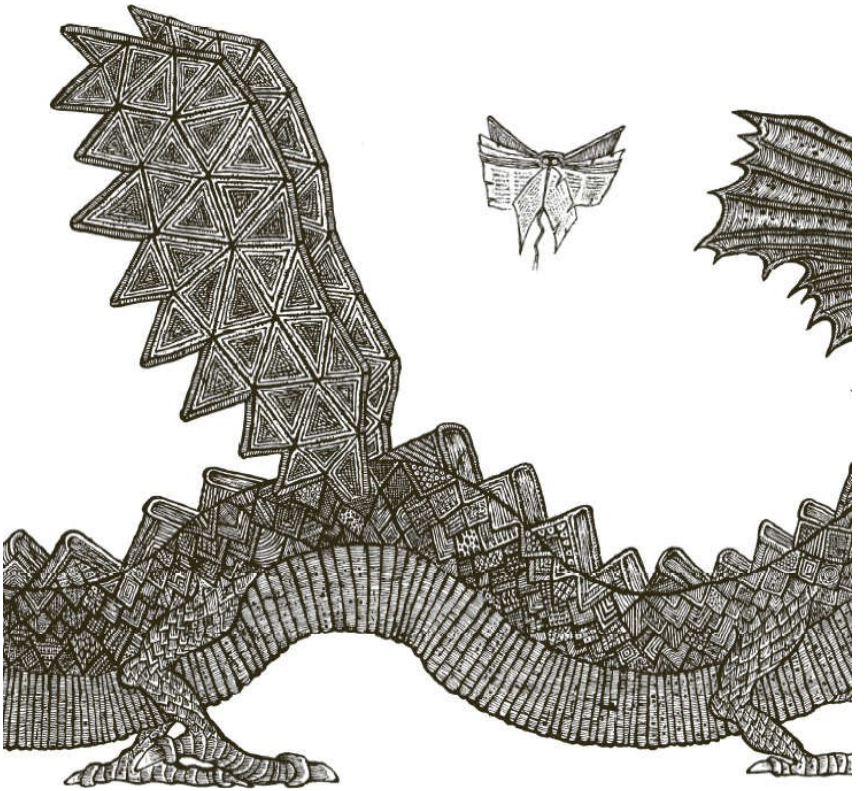


I nodded. “And everyone knew where you lived. That gives the saying about not wanting to be in someone’s skin a whole new meaning.”

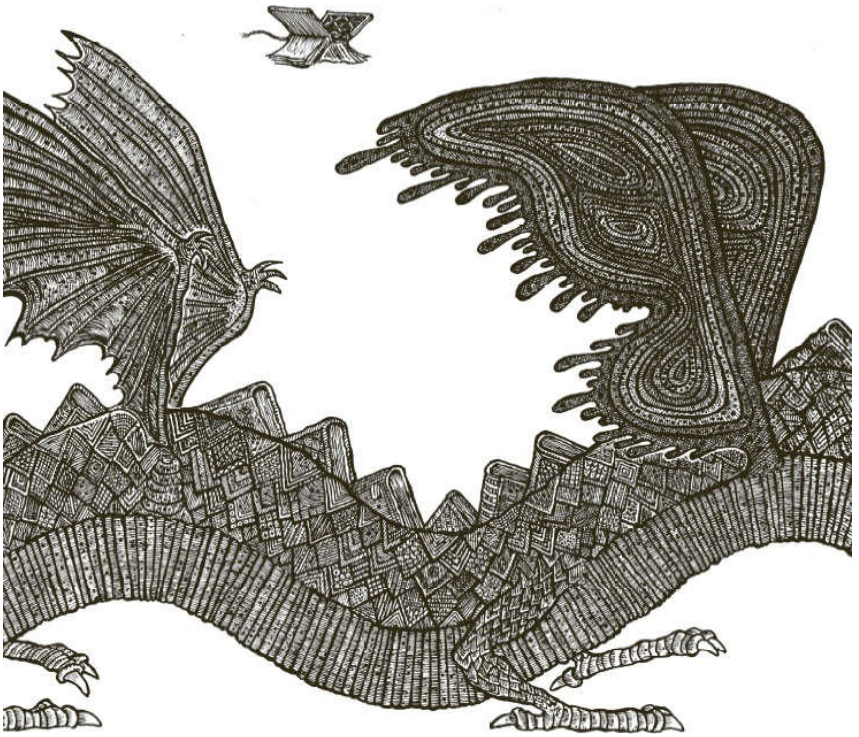


"You've got it, little one," groaned the dragon. "I wasn't just trapped; I'd become my own prison. And, as I said, so bloated from all those Orm books that I couldn't fit through any exit."

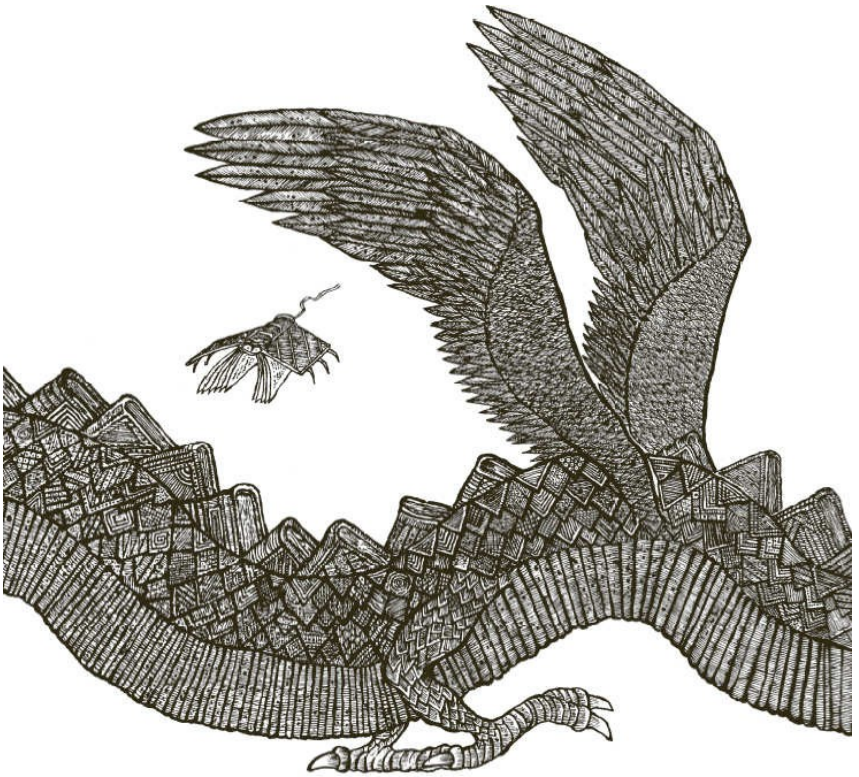
"What did you do?" I asked. "I mean—you're still alive."



"Exactly. We don't want to make it more exciting than it is. So, first of all: I am, well, a dragon, clear? One of the largest and most dangerous living creatures in Zamonia, feared by all, even in the Labyrinth. Even bookhunters with absolute disregard for death would think twice before messing with a walking funeral home like me!

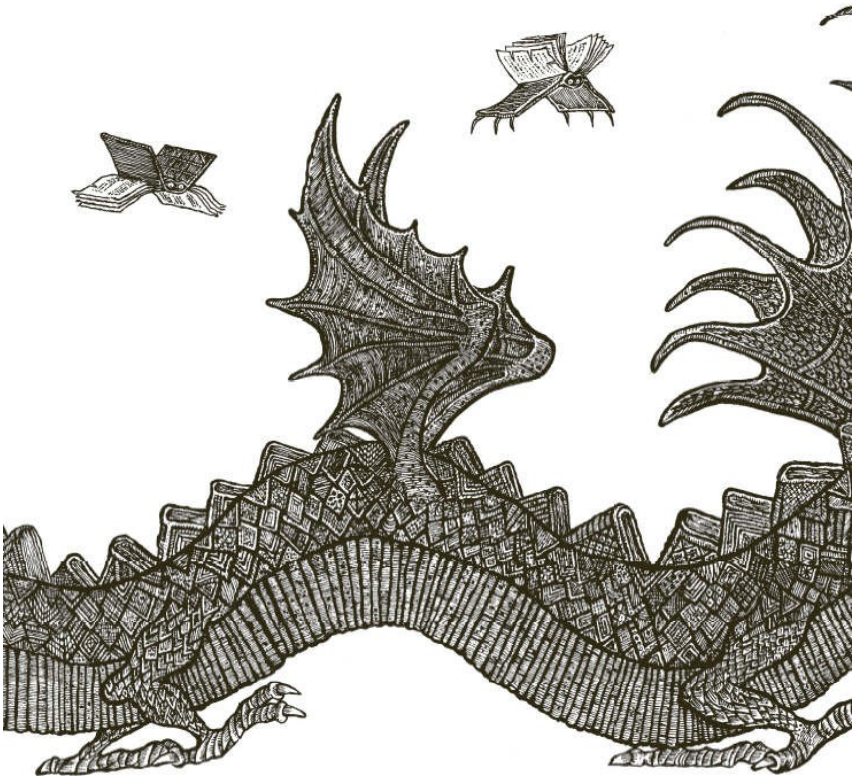


"And yet, I had to be prepared for it at any time. So though there was no reason to cower and whimper, I had to be vigilant. I could take on anyone, but I'm not invulnerable or immortal or anything like that. It was quite enough to eat a few idiots who actually dared to try and steal my scales while I slept. But I let some of them live so they could spread the news of my mercilessness.

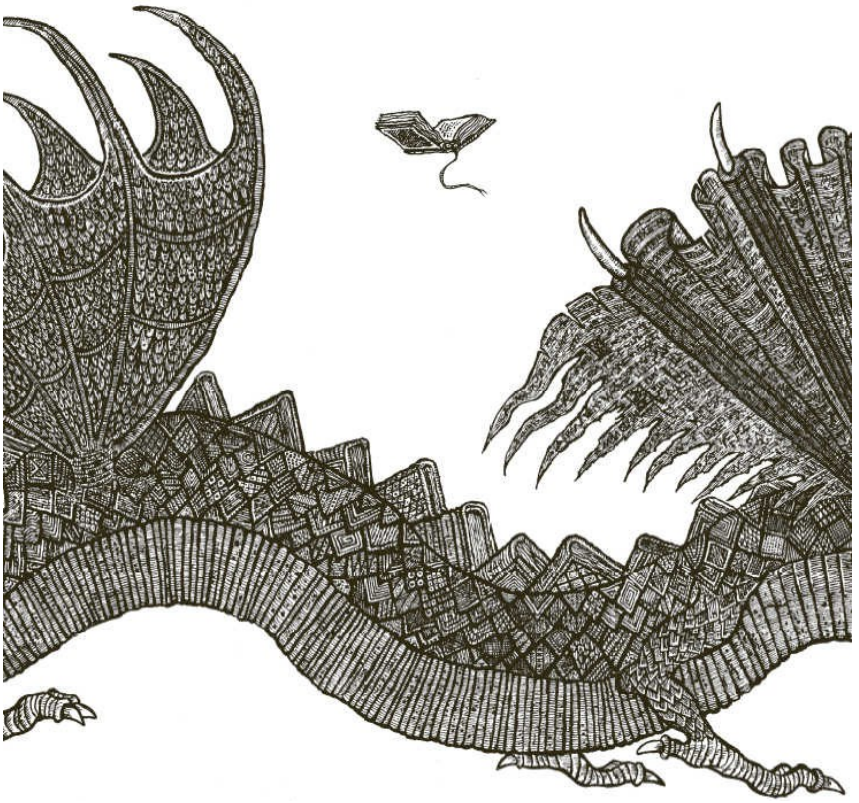


"And then there was silence?"

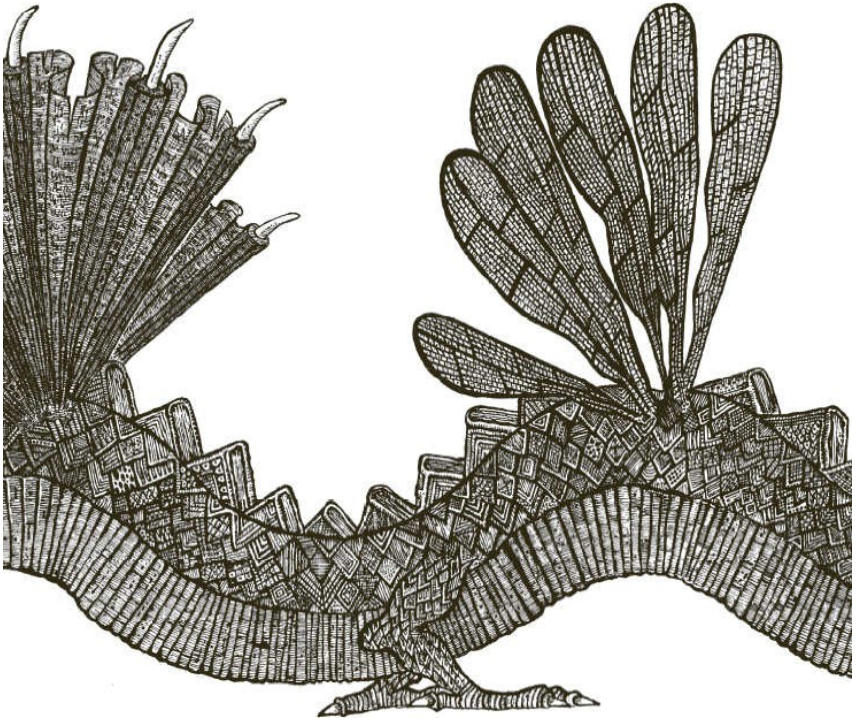
"No. Yes. No. Well, at first, yes. Since criminal methods didn't work against me, people attempted to solve the problem in a serious and scientific way. Bookkeepers were commissioned to...to imitate nature. They tried to artificially produce scale books that were just as effective as mine.



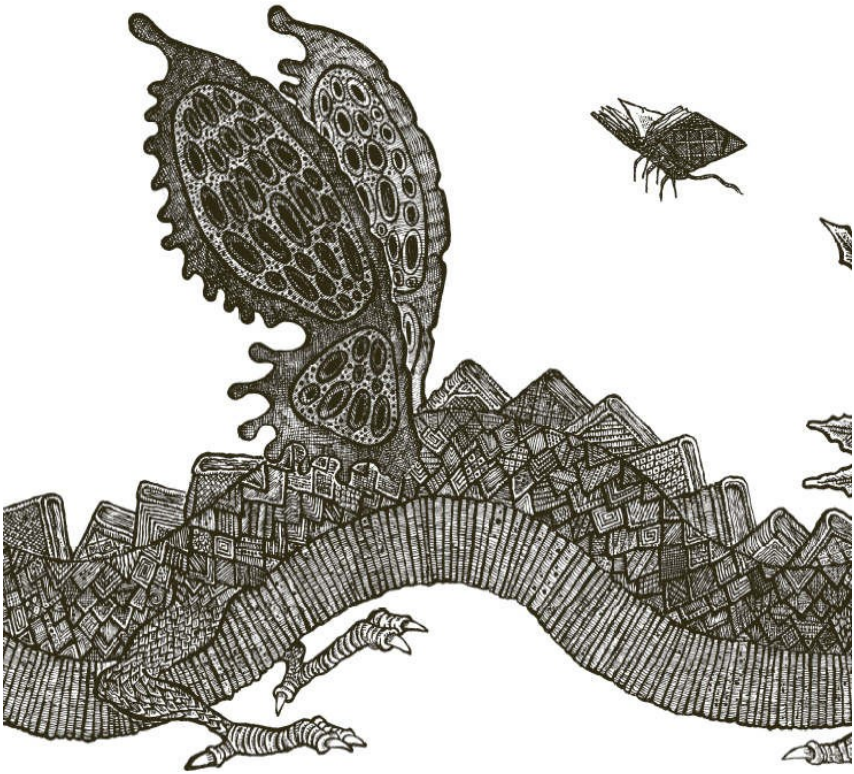
"It was actually a good idea, but they discovered that simply boiling books by orcish authors in magma water while yodeling bookish, eerie poetry wasn't enough. It worked about as well as turning lead into gold or water into wine—which is to say, not at all. For the real thing, there's no substitute. The dragon element was simply missing!



"Booksellers, antiquarians, and literary tycoons sacrificed the most precious parts of their libraries for experiments, had their unique Orm books processed into paper sludge by their bookish experts, and then bathed in the sludge for weeks, only to find the Orm didn't flow through them as it did through me. They had to learn the hard way that in my case, something unique had happened, something that could not be conjured up at the behest of a despot by a few quacks through some hocus-pocus.

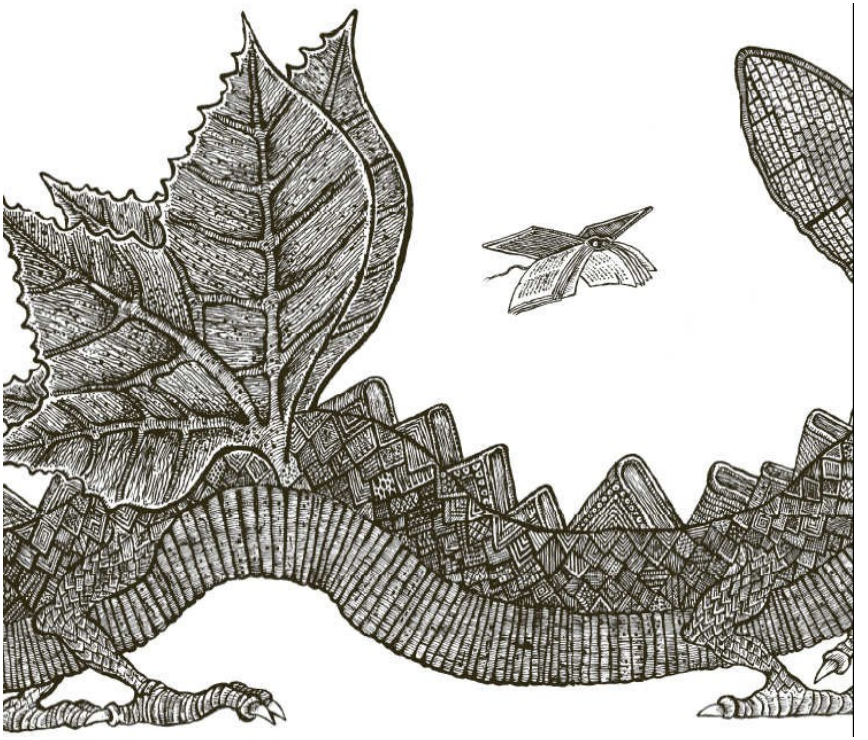


"Well, I would have been happy if the experiments had worked, because then I really would have had some peace and quiet. But there must be something in my scale sebum or in my dragon blood or in the convolutions of my lizard brain. A unique biochemical link, an unexplored dragon enzyme, or whatever else, that is indispensable for this wonder of nature.

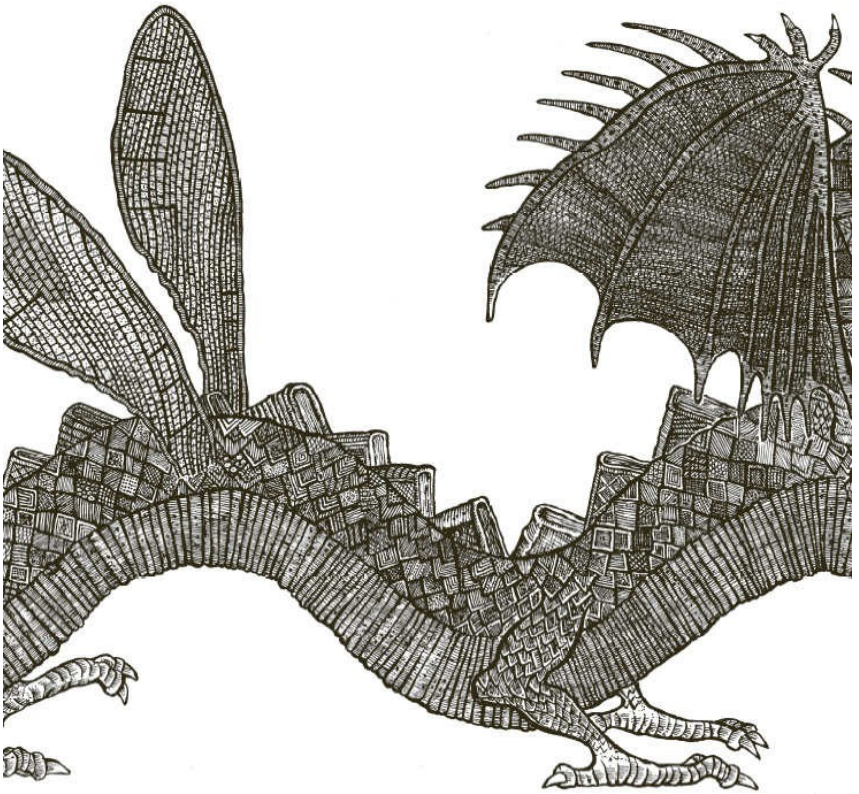


"My scales were impossible to replicate, period! Well, as is usual in such cases, some heads rolled—bookworm heads. And then they sicced all sorts of riffraff on me anyway."

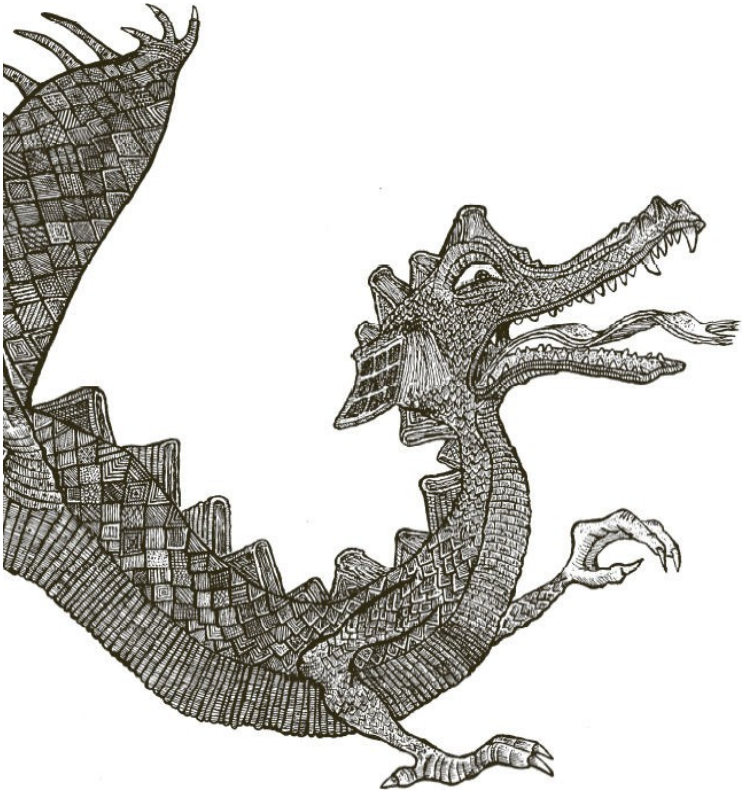
"Oh dear. How unpleasant."



"Truthfully...that wasn't a problem; it was just annoying. Okay, at first, the most dangerous characters were after me: book pirates, treasure hunters, suicidal types, and even the infamous bookhunters. Some actually managed to steal a few scales from me while I slept. And a few even managed to escape before I was fully conscious. Dragons sleep soundly, you have to remember.



"My sleep is full of nightmares, yes, but deep, and by the time I'm fully awake again in the morning, others have already had breakfast. But after that, I was on my guard! I set traps. I went hunting again myself. I confronted anyone who dared even to enter the swamp. And I did to them what I should have already done to those gossipy bookworm scientists."



"You buried them?"

"Exactly. Headfirst in the swamp and all that. And a few more were let go so they could spread the horror story. It took a while for that to get around, too. I had to bury quite a few more greedy individuals who weren't in the know. But after that, things quieted down. Nobody dared come near me anymore—except for insects, leeches, frogs, and swamp rats. My oracle career was over. I became a legend. Again. Evil dragon, good dragon—and evil dragon again. Ffff…

"But conditions in the catacombs have changed dramatically in other ways since then. There have been wars and natural disasters. Most of the highly advanced civilizations have died out and become myths themselves, like the Yoyoyya or the Colophonites. Some fled to the surface, where they scattered or intermingled with other life forms. And still others have literally gone mad. It is no exaggeration to say that entire catacomb cultures have collectively lost their minds. Some Underworld peoples have grown gills and suckers due to constant flooding. They supposedly vegetate somewhere deep within the Labyrinth, walking on the cave ceilings and feeding on slugs and bioluminescent fungi. Most areas of the catacombs have regressed to a primeval state, dominated by life forms that should have been extinct.

"Down here, time has gone haywire. It's flipped, running backward or sideways. Who can tell in a world where you sometimes can't distinguish up from down? Once-flourishing civilizations have crumbled into ruins, where the only yarn still spun is the silk of giant tarantulas. We live in a mausoleum; the catacombs are a gigantic underground cemetery with walking corpses, nothing more. Meanwhile, up in Bookholm, culture and life roar. Hhhh…"

The dragon groaned longingly. "To make a long story short: I became very lonely. Only very rarely did one or two bookhunters still come by. Some brain-dead idiots who hadn't grasped the signs of the

times. I killed them all. I have the least respect for the vermin in the catacombs, especially bookhunters and grave robbers; they're scavengers. Rats. Parasites. But they make excellent fertilizer! Where I bury them, trees often grow that glow in the dark. Ffff…"

The dragon snorted once more and looked at me for a long time. "So. Now you know my story. And now it's *your* turn. So spill it! Why are you here? What's your question?"

"Excuse me?" I asked in surprise.

"Your question. What is it?"

I reacted, dumbfounded and taken aback, still dazed by Nathaviel's life story. "Uh…wh…how…how did you know I had a question?"

"Everyone who comes to the Orm Swamp of their own free will has one. I am an oracle, my friend. *The* oracle. I answer questions. That's why people come here. Come on! Ask your question!" The dragon swayed his shoulders like a boxer preparing for a fight.

I racked my brains. The…question. Of course. The one that had started the whole adventure. The question. What was it again? Now I couldn't remember it! I was too excited! What was it? It had been so clever, but it seemed completely erased. *A really good dragon question,* Estrakos had called it.

"Uh…that's a good question," I said. "A really good question."

"Oh yeah? I certainly hope so. Now you've raised expectations even higherr! So, what is it? Don't keep me in suspense!"

"Uh…" I drew out, to buy myself some time. Something to do with literature, right? With writing. How to write well? No. Why do we write? Not that either. It had been a personal question. A dragon question.

"Come on, little one!" demanded Nathaviel. "You *have* a question. Guaranteed."

"Uh…why…uh…don't you write a book yourself?" I finally blurted out. Exactly! That was it. "I mean: Why don't you write? When you're

so full of the Orm? When you can speak fluently? Why aren't you a poet?"

For a few heartbeats, there was silence. I heard only the croaking of frogs, the buzzing of insects, and occasionally the bursting of a mud blister. I looked around as inconspicuously as possible. What were the chances of escape if things got dangerous?

"That was two to four questions," said Nathaviel. "At least. But all right...let's reduce it to the core question. Let's see: *Why am I not a poet?*" He paused and laughed in astonishment. "Hmm...hmm-hmmhmm... Now that's a good question! Ffff... No, really. It's new. You can tell it's good because no one has asked it before. Not even me! Uh...time to think, please!"

He remained silent for a long time, and I listened to the cacophony of the swamp. Croaking. Humming. Gurgling. Some animal shrieked so desperately, as if it were being eaten. Then the shriek stopped abruptly, and someone belched.

"Well," said the dragon at last, "an obvious answer might be: because it's rather difficult to hold a quill with such enormous paws." He waved his paw through the air. "But no, that isn't an answer but an excuse. Besides, I could have grabbed any poor fellow, one of the scientists or the royal secretaries, to make my personal writing slave. Some scribes used to visit; they would have been perfectly suited for becoming living notebooks. No, strangely enough, the idea never occurred to me. Not even in my wildest dreams. So there must actually be very concrete reasons why I don't write or want to dictate. I was never aware of these reasons, but there must be. That's a brilliant question, you know? You came up with it yourself?"

I nodded, blushing. "Yes," I replied.

The dragon took a few steps backward and disappeared back into the mist. I could only see a huge silhouette in the fog. He began to circle me, the rhythm of his footsteps making the swamp floor tremble. The unsettling thought occurred to me that escaping the

dragon's enclosure was now virtually impossible.

"I don't write books because *I don't want to be a poet!*" He suddenly poked his head out of the fog again, right behind me, where I hadn't expected him, scaring me half to death.

"That's the answer! I could also put it another way: I don't write because *I'm not stupid!*"

"What do you mean?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"Well, I *don't write* for the same reasons most people don't write. Because they don't want to spend years with a few fixed ideas in their heads that might one day turn into a novel. Ugh…who wants that? Only writers. Only poets. Apart from them, only children and lunatics talk to characters they've invented themselves. That's exactly what poets do: they go crazy, slowly and systematically. Sentence by sentence, page by page, chapter by chapter, book by book, day by day, year by year. Until they've finally built their very own madhouse out of paper and letters, where they can live alone. Who wants that? Only lunatics! Certainly not me."

"If that's how you see it…" I replied with due caution.

"Almost everyone likes books, but who voluntarily takes it upon themselves to write them? You might as well ask me why I don't enjoy drinking saber polish. Or bathing in molten lava. Writing must be awful! Most people feel the same way, even if they love literature. They want to read, and they're perfectly content with that. Happy, even. They probably experience more happiness in the few hours they spend reading a book than the author did in years of writing it." The dragon's face took on a dreamy expression, which quickly vanished. "Even poets would rather not be poets, if their writings are to be believed, you know that?"

Nathaviel pointed over his shoulder at his back with one of his claws. "In my scaly coat alone are a few hundred books in which writers lament their fate. And they do so wittily, thoroughly, and convincingly—but also bitterly. They experience writing as

imprisonment, torture, a curse, or an illness." Nathaviel bent down to me and breathed his moist breath into my face. He smelled like our book infirmary in the Leather Grotto, of high-quality book glue and the finest leather grease,when we're tending to a particularly large number of injured books at once.

"Almost none of them are delighted by their talent, believe me!" Nathaviel continued. "Far more often they're irritated. Dismayed. Offended! Frightened. Afraid of the blank page! Afraid of the full page! Afraid of the audience! Afraid of not having an audience! Afraid of too few ideas! Afraid of too many! Afraid of reviews! Afraid of no reviews! Afraid, afraid, afraid!" The dragon cackled maliciously. "And these are the complaints of gifted poets, in whom the Orm is simply roaring. The so-called *chosen ones.* It's probably the only work that never ends. Not even in sleep. Do you have any idea how many poets complain about waking up in the middle of the night? Who jolt awake and have to jot down an idea that came to them in a dream? An idea that will most likely prove to be completely stupid and useless the next morning? They're all nuts, believe me! And then you ask me why I don't write? Shhhh..." The dragon looked at me as if I were crazy myself.

"I...I'm sorry," I stammered. "I thought it would be a good question."

Nathaviel grinned. "It is, little one! It is! I just want to tease you a little. No: In your case, it's actually the most important question of all. You're just asking it to the wrong person."

"Who else?" I asked, puzzled, and looked around. It was just the dragon and me. "Who else should I ask this question?"

"Yourself. The real question is: Why don't *you* write a book?" The dragon grinned even more widely than before. "Isn't that right?"

"What?" I had absolutely no idea why I was blushing again, or why I felt caught red-handed, like a burglar in the act. Me—write a book? I was a bookling, not a poet. Quite honestly, the thought had never

even crossed my mind before. So…why did it feel important?

The dragon pushed his enormous skull so close and insistently toward me that I broke out in a sweat from his hot breath. "Bullseye, huh? Hhhh…" he whispered. "You're not here to learn about *me,* but to learn about *yourself*. Like everyone who comes here. I'm not an encyclopedia; I'm an oracle. People consult me to learn about themselves. They consult me to question themselves. They ask me the questions they don't dare ask themselves."

The dragon sucked a wisp of mist from the swamp floor with his nostrils, inhaled deeply, and exhaled it through his mouth as a thin ring of vapor that drifted away. "Yes…" he said, "that's why I prefer to give people riddles instead of concrete answers. They go home and think about it. And then they can't stop thinking and solve their problems themselves. It's that simple."

"That simple?" I repeated stupidly, just to say something.

"Yes. Oracle readings aren't much more complicated than that. If you're considering a career as an oracle, now you know how it's done: like this. I hereby award you the Oracle Diploma!" He made a blessing gesture with his paw in my direction and smiled gently. "I don't know a thing! Most of the time, people already know the solution to their problems. They want confirmation, not answers. A stamp of approval, not advice. They've already formulated the answers in their questions. I can read it on their faces. And what I see on *your* face, little one, is this: You no longer want to be just a reader. You no longer want to just consume books. You no longer want to have food served to you; you want to stand at the stove yourself and feel the fire. You've devoured enough books; now you want to write

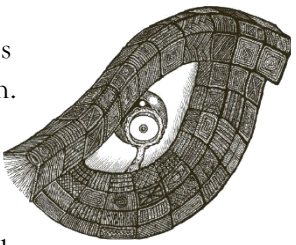
some! Isn't that right? You want to become a poet, little one!"

There was only one answer to that. "Yes," I whispered. "That's what I want."

Nathaviel's Prophecy

noticed not only in Hildegunst Two's immensely bright eyes that the bookling was completely absorbed in his story, but also in his expansive and dramatic gestures. I listened, fascinated, to his captivating performance.

"Congratulations!" cried the dragon, grinning. "I knew it! You're completely nuts. You actually want to become a poet. I can spot a mad poet a mile away! Even if he's never written anything." He came so close that I could see my reflection in his pupil.



"You have something in your eyes. Something like...hmm, what should I call it? It's like..." His voice suddenly sounded uncertain. "Like...like...haah..." He fell silent.

"Is something wrong? Are you okay?" I inquired.

His head began to shake, and his neck trembled. "Wait a minute," Nathaviel said, coughing. His voice suddenly sounded alarmed, almost fearful. "Something's coming..."

"Something coming?" I repeated, startled, listening intently to the

swamp. Danger? Was someone approaching? Something threatening? "What…is coming?"

"Aarrh…" the dragon wheezed, as if he had swallowed a swarm of moths. "It's…rhaah…the Orm…"

"The Orm?"

"That's how it always starts. This could…this could…arrh…become a real prophecy…"

"A prophecy?" I exclaimed excitedly. "You want to prophesy something?"

"Shut up!" croaked the dragon. "I need to… graah…concentrate…"

I fell silent. I barely dared to breathe. My whole body tensed, my fists clenched, my lip bitten. A prophecy? Concerning me? Good heavens! If I returned to the Leather Grotto with a genuine Orm-dragon prophecy, my reputation among the booklings would grow immeasurably. I could live off that for years, decades.

"Aahraaah…" Nathaviel roared. Then something truly remarkable happened: his voice swelled. I mean, it didn't just get louder, it became more voluminous. Richer, heavier, and darker—the way you'd imagine a dragon's voice to sound. Like a well that has swallowed a bell. And with this awe-inspiring voice, he spoke the words: "*The day will come when the one-eyed will join the scaly ones! The day will come when the Grotto will merge with the mountain! The day will come when memory will merge with the Orm. And this will be the day when writing will finally become art in Zamonia.*"

The dragon collapsed in on himself. "Please excuse my stilted language," he wheezed wearily as his voice returned to normal. "But that's always the way it is with prophecies when the Orm comes."

"You mean that was really the Orm? A genuine prophecy?"

"Of course! What else would you expect? What else *did* you expect? Musical accompaniment? Light effects?" The dragon seemed offended.

"No," I cried. "I just wanted to…I…this is so overwhelming."

"Yes, indeed!" groaned the dragon. "Don't worry. That was a prophecy. I recognize one when it comes, believe me. Now, don't ask me what it means."

That was exactly what I had planned on doing—ask the dragon what that cryptic announcement meant. I mean, how could memory merge with the Orm? Which memory was he referring to? And why wasn't writing already considered an art in Zamonia? There had been entire academies and universities dedicated to it for hundreds of years. There were countless doctors and professors who taught this writing as an art, tens of thousands of students who studied it, millions of readers who devoured books, and booklings who worshipped this art. What was all this cryptic babble? But the dragon had warned me not to ask, so I bit my tongue.

"No, no!" I exclaimed instead. "Uh—are you feeling better now?" I was really worried.

Nathaviel trembled all over, waves rippling through his long neck. He made noises like someone swallowing their own teeth.

"Yes, yes, everything's fine, harr..." He shook himself like a dog after a downpour, his scaly armor rattling and clattering like an old roof torn apart by a storm. "It surprises me every time. It's like being struck by lightning in the throat and out the backside. Like my brain wrestling with an octopus. And afterward, I feel like an anvil that's been forged on all night. Every atom in my body vibrates. But...raah... I'm okay again." He lowered his head to a muddy pool and drank greedily from it. I stood beside him, bewildered, not daring to ask any more stupid questions.

"Aah," said the dragon, "that was good. It's wonderful every time. I feel cleansed. Steeled, purified, emptied, and recharged all at once. As if I'd been torn into tiny pieces and then put back together again. A fantastic feeling! Incomparable. Uh...what did I say again?"

"'*The day will come when the one-eyed will join the scaly ones! The day will come when the Grotto will merge with the mountain! The day will come*

when memory will merge with the Orm. And this will be the day when writing will finally become art in Zamonia.'"

"Oh. Aha. Oh wow. Did I say *that?* Interesting. What's all this nonsense?" The dragon laughed.

"You can't remember? So soon after?"

"No. Never. Only in fragments. If I had to repeat my own prophecy, it would sound something like this: 'It will come the one-eyed man who will go to the Scaly Ones! The day will come when the grotto merges with the mountain! The Orm will come in which memory merges with art…' Or something like that. But it doesn't matter. I usually don't understand my own prophecies. But they're not meant for me." He laughed joylessly and coughed dryly. "So remember that saying well! I won't repeat it!"

"I'll never forget it. Never. Guaranteed." I was completely electrified and could hardly believe it had all happened. I had ventured into the Orm Swamp and actually found the Book Dragon. And not only that, he had given me a prophecy, and we had become friends. He had practically poured his heart out to me. Would they even believe me in the Leather Grotto?

"Good," said Nathaviel. "So that was your question. I hope I have answered it to your satisfaction."

"Yes, absolutely," I replied. "But what I'm currently much more interested in is that flawless story you mentioned. Could you perhaps…"

"Easy, my young friend," said the dragon. "One thing at a time. Let's get to the last important point. The scale."

"What do you mean by that?" I was completely thrown off by all the events, the richness of detail, and the sheer volume of his narrative. I didn't know what he was getting at.

"Well, the scale. You came for two things: the question and the scale."

I had to swallow hard when it all came flooding back. Right, I had

actually come to steal a scale.

"You came to steal one of my scales. That's fine, everyone comes to me for those two things. I already answered your question, even gave you a real Orm prophecy. But the scale is different. I can't give you one. Not a single one, because that would start it all over again. You take the scale to your friends, cook up a nice scale soup, get high from it, write a few books. And the story gets around again, and the whole circus starts all over again. A few hundred years ago, I would have said: well, why not? So a few nutcases come into the Orm Swamp again and steal my scales, so what? But the thing is: I'm a very different dragon now. I want my peace and quiet. I have my regular sleep routine. And times have changed. I have no idea how modern dragon hunting has developed, but I bet it's improved. Maybe this time they'll come not just to steal a few scales, but to skin me alive. I can't risk that. I can't afford to let you go. Scale or no scale."

"What exactly do you mean?" I asked anxiously. "Do you want to keep me prisoner?"

"No. Probably not."

"But what?" I asked, even more anxiously.

"It means that I unfortunately have to kill you."

I froze. Had he actually said *kill?*

"Yes, that's annoying," said the dragon. "We had a really good conversation, and you asked an original question. But there's nothing I can do about it. Look, I didn't ask you to show up here and turn my life upside down. Things have consequences, and you have to be able to live with them. Otherwise, you just shouldn't do certain things. It's that simple."

I was far too shocked to freak out. "You want to…eat me?" I asked, surprisingly calmly.

"No, heaven forbid—absolutely not!" Nathaviel protested indignantly. "Didn't you listen at all? I don't eat talking creatures anymore. I…" He paused. "Well, I'll bury you in the swamp. Legs up, according

to old tradition. You'll be the first bookling flower planted in the Orm Swamp. Try to think of it as, uh, an investment in the future! Maybe something beautiful will grow from you. I'm sorry, because I really do like you, little one. You deserved better. But you'll get a particularly nice spot, I promise. It was your idea to come here, so don't you dare blame me! You shouldn't have stood there rooted to the spot but run off like your fellow creatures. Now, unfortunately, you know too much! You brought this on yourself."

He opened his sticky mouth and pushed his lower jaw a little way into the swamp. That was all it took, like digging with a very large spade. This simple and well-practiced head movement set the ground beneath me in motion, and I lost my balance. Then I slid, along with the mud, into the lizard's mouth.

In the Dragon's Mouth

nderscoring the drama of the situation, the bookling waved his hands excitedly.

My fate would have been to slide straight down his throat and into his stomach, but the dragon suddenly raised his head, stopping my slide. Now I was sitting in his wet mouth on a sticky tongue, his giant teeth blocked my way out like the bars of a predator's cage.

"Listen, look, look, look," said the dragon somewhat indistinctly. "I can't talk properly with my mouth full. Therefore, I'll only say it once: My bedtime has come, and I have very strict sleeping habits. So I will sleep soundly and only then bury you. Consider it a sign of timidity! I advise you to keep quiet and not disturb my sleep. If you do, then you'll live a little longer. Good night."

After this mumbled address, he let his head sink into the mud, where it remained. It only took a few minutes before the dragon's breath, which warmly surrounded me, became so calm and regular that I had no doubt he was truly asleep. He kept his jaw closed, but his jowls and lips slightly parted, so that I could see the swamp all around him through the grid of his teeth.

My situation had changed so quickly and so radically that only now did I begin to grasp what had happened. I must have been in shock, because I alternated between laughing and crying until I finally managed to calm down. "You're still alive," I told myself, "and as long as the dragon is asleep, that won't change." I tried to think through my escape options as rationally as possible. It was astonishing how calm I became. Perhaps it was the dragon's steady breathing or that I had cried myself to exhaustion or that I was generally weary, believe it or not, I fell asleep too. Right in the middle of the dragon's mouth.

"That is indeed astonishing," I replied. Hildegunst Two looked at me blankly. "You were in a rather hopeless situation."

"Yes," said the bookling. "I have no idea how long I slept. Until I was woken up by a voice."

"The voice of the dragon?"

"No, he was still asleep. It was the voice of Estrakos."

"Estrakos? The leader of the Ormlings?"

The bookworm's face lit up. "Yes, exactly!" he exclaimed. "The Classics." And he continued his story.

It was Estra. He was standing outside, in front of the prison of teeth where I had sleepily come to, along with the other Classics: Arkaneon, Eliastrotes, Eideprius, Steraphasion, and Klosophes. The six of them looked utterly terrified, which brought me back to the reality of what a terrible situation I was in. Suddenly, I was wide awake.

"We are so incredibly sorry!" whispered Estra. "We didn't mean for this to happen."

How should I respond? With curses, insults, bitter accusations? This wasn't the right moment. "You should have thought of that beforehand," I hissed back instead, surprisingly composed. The ensuing conversation took place entirely in whispers, like children secretly arguing under the covers.

"We didn't know the dragon actually existed," said Estra. "We're completely baffled ourselves."

"You didn't know?"

"No! We'd never seen the dragon before. We'd never been here. We'd only overheard a few remarks from the big booklings: that you could smell the Orm Swamp behind the Crystal Garden and things like that. We speculated about it, but we never checked. We wouldn't have dared."

"We made up the rest," Elias interjected. "Completely spontaneously, off the cuff, in our conversation with you. We wanted to tease you a little. We often do that with the little ones. We didn't know you were serious. Besides, we thought the dragon was just something the grown-ups had made up. A scare tactic to keep us from leaving the Leather Grotto. It wasn't until you disappeared that we started to worry. And finally, we went looking for you."

This couldn't be true! This bunch of holdouts had been bragging drivel to me about a dragon that supposedly didn't exist. A double and triple lie. And now we had to learn the hard way that it was the truth! A fairy tale about a fairy tale that turned out to be reality. What a twisted irony! If my situation hadn't been so dire, I would have laughed uproariously.

"We thought we'd find you somewhere in the Crystal Garden," Eideprius whispered from behind, "wandering around crying or something. But then you were nowhere to be seen, and we kept searching. We went exactly the way Elias described the way to you until at some point, we caught that smell, that nasty swamp stench. And then…"

"Yes, yes, no problem!" I interrupted him. "I can imagine the rest. Did you at least bring weapons?"

"Weapons?" asked Klosophes. "What kind of weapons?"

"Any kind. Lances, swords, tranquilizer arrows. Something for fighting dragons."

"There are no weapons in the Leather Grotto; you know that. At most, tools. Mostly from the typesetter and printer trades."

"Well, that's just great, isn't it," I hissed.

A stunned silence fell. Only the bubbling of the swamp and the snoring of the dragon could be heard.

"We could hypnotize him," suggested Steraph.

"That would be nice if we could," Arka waved off, "but we can't. Only the great booklings can do that."

"Then we'll get them," suggested Elias.

"You're crazy!" I hissed. "Go to the Leather Grotto and then back here again? The dragon will have eaten me and digested me three times over in that time! You have to get me out of here *now*! Immediately!"

All six of them then whispered so excitedly at once that I feared they might wake the dragon.

"Be quiet!" I commanded. "I need to think." It was clear that the solution wouldn't come from them. I had to take the initiative myself. "I'll tell you what we'll do," I decided. "I've received some information from the dragon that might help us. Just do as I say, okay?"

They looked at me expectantly, obviously overjoyed that I was

stupid enough to take responsibility for this hopeless situation.

"Did you really have a plan?" I asked Hildegunst Two.

"Yes, I had one. The only question was whether it was any good. In a situation like this, it's crucial that at least one person gives the impression of unwavering belief in its success. That's why I tried to inject as much confidence as possible into my voice when I said, "'So, here's what we'll do.'"

The Classics looked at me expectantly.

"Yesss…?" Estra asked cautiously.

"First, we have to get the dragon to open his mouth," I decided. "Unfortunately, that means we have to wake him up. We…"

"You want to wake the dragon?" asked Estra. "Isn't that…"

"There's no other way," I interrupted quickly, before he could say "completely insane," "suicidal," or "murderous." "The dragon has recurring nightmares. He told me so. So we should…"

"You spoke to him?" Elias asked. "He can actually talk? And he told you something like that?"

"He told me all sorts of other things. Could I please explain my plan now, without being constantly interrupted? Yes? We're running out of time."

"Of course," replied Estra, and the Classics all fell silent.

"Thank you! So: He keeps having this nightmare about eating himself, starting with his tail. Got it?"

"He dreams of eating himself from the tail up?" Arka asked.

"He's a rather peculiar dragon," I tried to cut to the chase. "Never mind! Here's my plan: You pick up the tip of his tail, carry it over here, and stick it through one of these gaps in his teeth. I'll pull it into his mouth and clamp it in place. Then we'll wake him up! He'll think he's eating himself in his sleep, I bet. And so he'll definitely spit out his tail—and me along with it. I'll land in the swamp, so it'll be a soft landing. Before he's even properly come to his senses, we'll be long gone."

Arka looked even more worried than before. “Is that your plan?” he asked. “Are you insane? Have you lost your mind in there?”

Although I myself had serious doubts about my sanity, I resolutely asked: “Do you have a better suggestion? Mine at least offers a chance.”

“Yes—the chance that you’ll be eaten,” said Eidep.

“That we’ll *all* be eaten!” wailed Kloso.

“And you deserve it,” I said accusingly, “because *you* got us all into this situation. Me, yourselves, and the dragon. You and your big mouths. *You’re* to blame for everything. So do something! Now!”

“And…how do you imagine you’ll wake him up?” Estra asked, intimidated.

Now I finally had them under my control. They felt guilty, their resistance was broken, and they had something to make up for. “That’s the brilliant part of my plan,” I asserted brazenly. “As soon as the tip of his tail is in his mouth, you pull one of his scales out of his shell. One of the books. Just like the Ormling test.”

“Uh, that was a lie too,” said Estra meekly.

“What was a lie?” I asked sharply.

“There is no Ormling test. There are no Ormlings.”

“There are no Ormlings?”

“No, we don’t even have code names,” added Steraph.

Unbelievable! Not even that! No Ormlings, no secret existence, no rituals! No covert investigations, no espionage. All just a lot of hot air. For absolutely nothing, I’d marched into a swamp of deadly danger and was now stuck in a prison of dragon’s teeth.

But this wasn’t the time to get any more worked up.

“We’ll talk about that later,” I said quietly, which was enough to make them all look down in embarrassment. “So: We’ll wake him up with the scale amputation. Make sure you try to keep the scale book if possible! Those things are actually extremely valuable. The dragon told me that too.”

"He told you quite a lot," said Steraph. It sounded almost like an accusation, but he was probably just jealous.

"Yes," I whispered, nodding darkly. "That's why he wants to kill me. I know too much."

The booklings looked at me in awe. With that last sentence, I had them completely hooked.

"But, uh, is that really the best method? I mean, waking him up so roughly?" Elias ventured to object. "He'll go crazy if we pull something like that out. It must hurt."

"All the better!" I hissed. "The more agitated he is when he wakes up, the more recklessly he'll react. And the greater our chances. Before he even realizes what's going on, we'll be long gone. The dragon's eyesight isn't what it used to be."

"Did he tell you that too?" asked Steraph.

"Exactly. Confusion, pain, visual impairment: these are all advantages for us. He'll be completely thrown off balance."

A rumbling sound went through the Orm Swamp. We all looked around in a panic and then realized it was the dragon making digestive noises in his sleep.

"We should hurry," urged Estra, who had grasped the urgency of the situation and remembered his position of leadership. "Let's go, guys!"

The six Classics looked at each other one last time and nodded resolutely. Then they turned away from me together and trudged off through the swamp. I remained alone in my cage of dragon teeth and briefly considered wishing them good luck, but then decided against it.

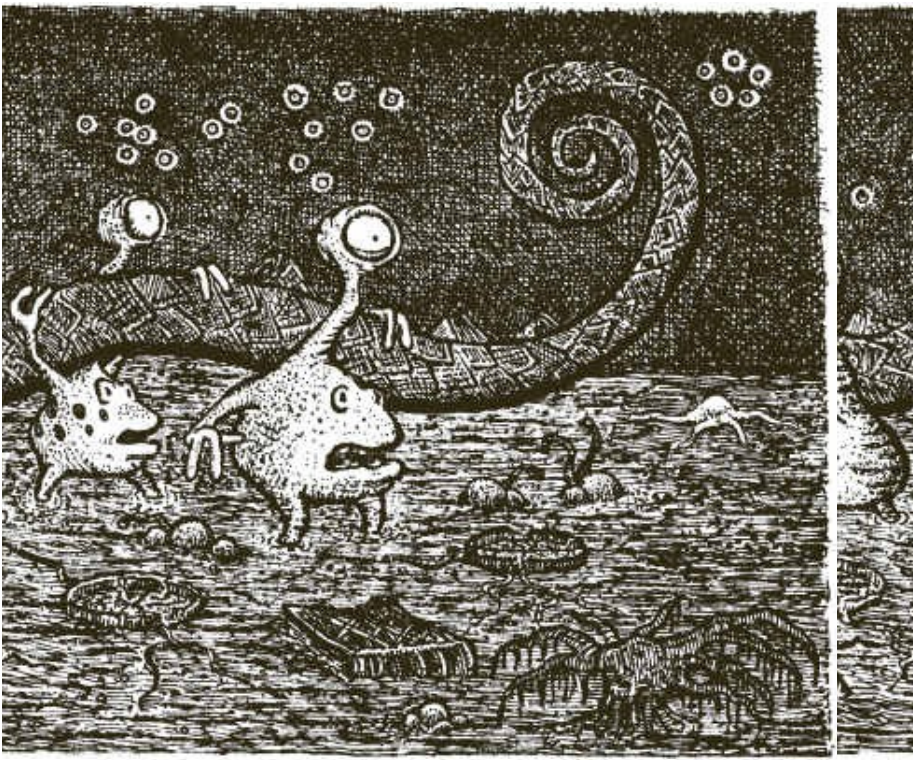
Soon, I heard only the dragon's steady snorting and the occasional animal sound from the swamp. Was I imagining things, or were the sounds becoming more varied and louder? Could it be that the fauna of the Orm Swamp was coming back to life? It was hard to say how long I had slept—a few minutes or several hours. If the latter was the

case, the risk of the dragon awakening on his own increased. Panic rose within me, triggering a whole chain of catastrophic thoughts: Was the Book Dragon's tail flexible enough to be inserted into his own mouth? Were my diminutive friends even strong enough to lift and move the dragon's tail? And what if the dragon awoke right then and there? What would I do then? Scream? Step on his tongue? Bite it so he would spit me out?

When I was younger, I once accidentally got a will-o'-the-wisp in my mouth. The insect thrashed about so wildly, buzzing, flapping its wings, and scratching my tongue with its legs that I panicked even more than the tiny creature itself. So I spat it out immediately, whereupon it buzzed and sputtered off angrily. For a long time afterward, I cried every time I thought back to that moment, so intimidating had the feisty firefly and its will to survive been.

This told me it was perfectly possible to defend yourself even in my situation. If the will-o'-the-wisp had played dead and stayed still, I might even have swallowed it in my childish naiveté and curiosity. But you don't swallow something that's alive, struggling, and fighting back fiercely. So, I resolved to signal my will to live as clearly as possible if the dragon awoke. And if that were what it took, then I you can bet I would bite his tongue back!

But he didn't awaken. In fact, nothing happened during the entire wait, apart from my fantasies of catastrophe. I could only endure, nervously fidgeting with my fingers, until Estra, Elias, Arka, Eidep, Steraph, and Kloso finally reappeared from the mist—to my indescribable relief. It was a surreal sight to see, through a grid of yellowish-tinged dragon teeth: six booklings, surrounded by colorful



will-o'-the-wisps, working together to carry a lizard tail like a tree trunk through the Orm Swamp. You don't see something like that every day!

Naked fear pulsed in their glowing eyes, and they placed their steps so cautiously and slowly, as if they were moving through a field full of tripwires and traps. None of them uttered a single sound, which I found exceptionally disciplined and admirable. It would not have been wise to encourage them in their brave endeavors, so I simply watched with extreme tension until they finally reached the dragon's head.

Suddenly, there was a *Blubb!* and Kloso, who had been in the middle of the group, vanished. He was simply gone, completely submerged in the black mire. Where he had been standing, dragon's tail slung over his shoulder, a thick air bubble inflated until it burst.

The others froze, staring at each other in astonishment. It was like Kloso had dissolved into a swarm of will-o'-the-wisps. Like a magic trick. I, too, had frozen in shock. For a few rapid heartbeats, we all remained motionless, listening for any sign of life from our swamp-swallowed companion. In that moment, I perceived them again with stark clarity: the never-ending sounds of the Orm Swamp. The gurgling and hissing, the bubbling and smacking, the croaking of the frogs, and the buzzing of the insects. But not a sound, not a sign from Kloso. Nothing.

And then, with a second loud *Blubb!,* Kloso reappeared from the mud! First his eye, then his long neck. Finally, he rose completely out of the oily swamp hole in which he had sunk, covered head to toe in greenish-brown mud and algae. "Bwaah…!" he gasped. "Watch out! There are…haah…holes here!"

As if nothing of importance had happened, he resumed his position. The five other booklings let out suppressed sounds of relief, and I slumped behind my cage of teeth. The dragon remained motionless, continuing to pump his warm breath through his throat and mouth

in a completely relaxed sleep rhythm.

"Come on, guys!" Estra whispered. "We're almost there."

The Classics dragged the lizard tail, panting, to the dragon's head and poked its tip through a gap in the giant teeth. I bravely grasped the end of the tail with both hands and pulled it in as far as I could. The book-scale skin felt warm and sticky. Then I wedged the tail firmly in a gap between two teeth.

"That's it," I whispered through the bars of his mouth. "Now you have to wake him up!"

Estra, Arka, Elias, Eidep, Steraph, and Kloso stood stunned. The moment of truth had arrived, but they didn't move, like insects frozen in panic. Finally, Estra whispered, "Let's go!" and they mechanically began to move again.

Everything else happened outside my field of vision. All I could do was remain cowering behind those giant teeth, fearful as animal in a cage, hoping that everything would go according to plan.

Suddenly, the dragon moved his tongue. For the first time since I had been trapped in his mouth, the tongue noticeably lifted. Until then, it had only occasionally twitched or trembled.

"Raah..." growled a voice from within the lizard. This couldn't have come at a more inopportune moment! Surely it wasn't a reaction to my companions' activities yet? No, the dragon had actually awakened on his own. Too soon!

"Graah..." Nathaviel grunted. His tongue swished noisily back and forth in his slimy throat; I had to hold onto his teeth to keep from being knocked over. The warm flow of his breath stopped for a moment, and then the dragon gasped for air. There was no doubt about it; these were the typical symptoms of a dragon awakening.

Too early! Too early! Much too early! was all I could think. *Too early! Too early!* My resolve to behave bravely like the raging will-o'-the-wisp, my vow to bite the dragon's tongue—all that gave way to a pathetic indecisiveness. I couldn't do anything rash! If my friends didn't get a

chance to pull a scale off him, the dragon would probably react far less recklessly. He'd assess the situation in a flash, swallow me first, and then trample the other six. It was all about timing. But how could I determine when to act if I didn't know what the others were doing? We'd wasted far too much time on pointless chatter.

Then I heard a sound unlike any I'd ever heard before. At first, it was just a subdued gurgling, like the subterranean rumble of an awakening volcano. Then it grew louder and louder. At the same time, I felt myself being lifted upwards by a giant fist—indeed, the dragon was raising his head! A violent blast of air knocked me off my feet. I fell backwards and landed with a thud on the damp, sticky lizard tongue. Then the gurgling turned into a bubbling and hissing sound, and I felt as if I were standing right in the middle of a scalding jet of steam from an erupting geyser.

"Graaahrraaaah!" went the dragon, and this time there was no doubt: that was a cry of pain. Kloso and the others had obviously amputated one of the book scales! But why didn't the dragon open his damned jaws? Instead, he raised his head higher and higher. The hissing became an angry roar, the pressure of the airflow increased dramatically—but he didn't open his mouth! Perhaps he was just stretching his long neck to swallow me more easily. This was the moment! The moment that allowed no further indecision, the moment to act.

And I acted! Instinctively, and exactly like the will-o'-the-wisp that had bitten my own tongue. I threw myself to my knees, dug my fingers into the spongy, slippery flesh of my tongue, I bent down and took a hearty bite!

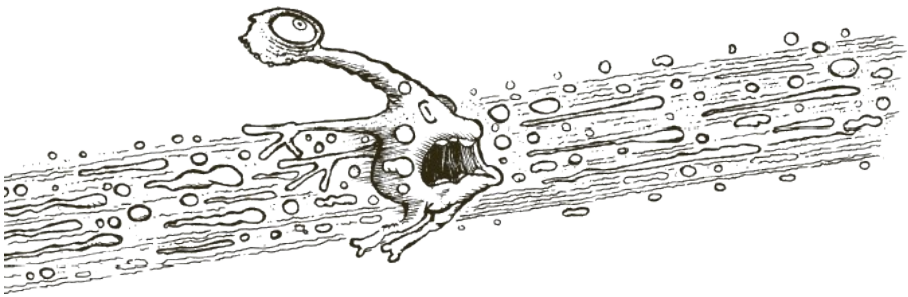
Never before have I tasted anything so horrible. And I will never reveal the secret of what that disgusting dragon's tongue truly tasted like. I will take it to my grave! Yes indeed. I'd wager I'm the only one who possesses such knowledge.

Hildegunst Two's cyclopean eye glowed with pride, and I

secretly wondered why he was so proud of this exclusive knowledge, but I didn't dare ask so as not to interrupt his narrative flow again.

The dragon must have thought, that he was about to be attacked by bookhunters or other suicidal adventurers when he felt the pain in his tail and tongue. For now he finally opened his jaws! He let out a tremendous, spasmatic sound that I cannot describe, and then I was launched from the dragon's mouth like a cannonball on a massive jet of spit.

I hadn't expected Nathaviel to raise his head before spitting me out. Nor had I anticipated that he would do so with such force and such a large amount of bodily fluid. Suddenly, I had a vast view of the Orm Swamp; I was looking down at a sea of brightly colored mists—white, red, yellow, and green—and above them, swarms of will-o'-the-wisps. Here and there, enormous stalagmite s rose from the haze, glowing in every imaginable color. Far in the distance, I could even



recognize the giant stalagmite that had caught my eye on the way in, with its vibrant blue and extraordinary size. It was truly a magnificent view, but unfortunately, I couldn't enjoy it.

"Aaaaah!" I screamed instead. "Aaaah!"

"Raaah!" the dragon roared after me as if in reply

My flight already began a downward turn. Where would I land? On hard ground? Granite? A stalagmite? It was none of those things, thank goodness. The next moment, I plunged into a pool of oily

moor mud and swamp water. Mud enveloped me like mucus, and stagnant water shot through my nose and down my throat. I flailed and kicked wildly until I surfaced, spitting and puffing.

Desperately, I searched for anything to hold onto. I couldn't swim! The water tasted awful, rotten, and poisonous all at once.

After a few false starts and grabs, my feet finally found slimy but somewhat stable ground. I gasped and wheezed, clung to roots, cursed, and staggered forward until, finally, I reached firmer ground.

I stopped and wiped the mud and bits of vegetation from my body, terrified and incredibly relieved at the same time. I was free! I was still alive!

Behind the mist that now enveloped me, Nathaviel raged and roared. Since I could no longer see him, he couldn't see me either… could he? Part of my plan had been accomplished. Now I had to find the others. Not an easy task, when you can't see anything except shimmering water vapor.

"Estra?" I whispered. "Elias? Kloso? Anyone nearby? Steraph? Hello? Eidep? Arka?"

No one answered. How could they, considering how far I'd flown? Hopefully, at least one of them had seen me and could pinpoint where I'd landed. How else would we find each other in this fog?

Wait a minute! Had I broken anything? Dislocated, sprained, or twisted anything? I felt all over my body, but there weren't any particularly painful spots except that my entire back, where I'd hit the swamp's surface, burned like a brutal whiplash. Besides that, my ears rang terribly, my heart pounded in my chest, and my hands shook like aspen leaves—but those were perfectly normal reactions to such a breakneck fall. Basically, I was unharmed.

"Hildegunst?" someone hissed. "Are you still alive?"

"Yes! Yes!" I whispered back. "I'm okay." I clapped my hands. "Here! Where are you?"

Six bookling eyes emerged from the mist like luminous jellyfish

surfacing. Then I saw the shimmering silhouettes of their bodies, and they stood before me, apparently also unharmed.

"You flew quite a far distance," said Kloso. "Are you alright?"

"I think so," I replied, "and how are you?"

"We've got the scale!" said Estra, triumphantly holding up a resin-encrusted book. "It was easy to pull out."

"The dragon's tail almost hit me," Elias reported breathlessly. "The gust of wind completely knocked me off my feet."

"He almost got me with his paw," said Kloso. "My goodness—he's really angry!"

"No one seriously injured or dead? Good! Now let's get out of here!" I ordered. "We can tell each other our stories when we're safe."

"Which direction?" asked Estra.

"That way!" I asserted, pointing into the distance. "There's a giant stalagmite over there, covered in blue mushrooms. I passed it on the way here. So that must be the direction that leads us back to the Leather Grotto."

Judging by the deafening roars of the dragon, we were far from being out of danger. I was shocked by the bestial bellowing this civilized lizard was capable of. It sounded like an entire pack of predators.

"He's really angry," said Kloso. "We should get out of here as quickly as possible. Before he catches our scent or something."

We trudged in the direction I had indicated; walking normally, let alone running, was out of the question. The marshy ground condemned us to a form of locomotion that uncomfortably reminded me of nightmares in which I had to flee from some unspecified danger but barely moved. A loud squelching sounded beneath our feet with every step, no matter how carefully we placed our feet.

"Please try to walk a little more quietly," I urged, even though I

was making just as much noise as the others.

"So which is it?" grumbled Kloso. "Quickly or quietly? Doing both at the same time is impossible. You have to decide."

The dragon's roar suddenly ceased. For a while, I heard only the telltale squelching of our footsteps. Then the wind picked up.

Wind? Was that even possible in such a deep underground grotto? No, that wasn't wind at all. That was…yes, that was warm breath, and of course I knew immediately who was causing it. It was the same warm breath that had enveloped me in Nathaviel's throat. Dragon breath.

"Hhhhhhhaaaaahhh!" went the dragon. "Hhhhhaaaahhh!"

"The dragon is blowing away the fog!" said Steraph, his voice filled with unmistakable panic. "If he keeps going like this, he'll soon be able to see us."

And indeed, the fog around us began to dance, becoming increasingly transparent.

This was a factor I hadn't considered in my escape plan: Nathaviel's intelligence. His experience in tracking down fleeing prey. His hunting instincts. After all, we weren't the first to run from him. The swamp was littered with the corpses of unfortunate souls who had tried in vain to escape.

"Hhhhaaaahh," Nathaviel snorted. "Hhhhaaahhh… I know you're still nearby. I can hear your footsteps. And soon the fog won't hide you anymore. You can stop trying! Just give it up! No one escapes the Orm Swamp. Not even I managed it."

The dragon was lying! Or at least he was shamelessly exaggerating, because he had told me that a few bookhunters had managed to escape with valuable scales. This information had formed the backbone of my optimistic escape plan.

"That's not true at all," I hissed to the other bookworms. "There are some who have made it."

"Oh yeah? But what are we supposed to do?" Estra gasped. "We're

hardly getting anywhere. And he'll see us any second now."

"Hhhhaaaahhhh!" Nathaviel roared again. "Hhhhaaahhh..." His increasingly warm breath washed over us in a new wave.

I wish I could fly, I thought, watching enviously as the swamp insects fled around us from the animalistic dragon's breath, effortlessly swarming off in all directions.

I racked my brains. What else was there? Besides walking and flying? How did the creatures of the swamp move? They crawled. They flew, yes. They swam, of course.

"Hhhhaaaahh," went the dragon. "Hhhhaaaahhh..."

The Bookworms

ectures take a lot of breath, and I was beginning to get seriously worried that Hildegunst Two would eventually run out. I knew, after all, that the capacity of those little bookling lungs was rather limited. But he was already raising his hands again in a pleading gesture and continuing undeterred.

I watched with alarm as the fog tore into ever smaller pieces, becoming more transparent with each breath. I could already make out the silhouette of Nathaviel's enormous head and neck. Directly in front of me, a fat blue frog jumped headfirst into the water and vanished without a trace.

But yes indeed! There were creatures who had successfully escaped the dragon. And not just a few bookhunters. They were even booklings like us! The dragon had told me this too, in his flurry of information: *Nervous, shy creatures–like sparrows. I think they were watching me. Probably even studying me. But as soon as I approached them–whoosh!–they were gone again. Making contact was impossible.*

Those were his own words. How could booklings always escape him? What had made them so confident, repeatedly seeking his

company? They must have had a strategy for retreating, otherwise they wouldn't have taken the risk. We booklings are far too timid and cautious for that.

A narrow strip of water stretched out next to our swampy path. An entire family of these furry, long-tailed rodents that usually filled me with so much fear was swimming there. Now, as the rodents fled with us from the dragon, I felt sorry for them. Suddenly, as if on cue, they all dove down together and disappeared under a blanket of marsh rose leaves.

"Of course!" I said aloud.

"What?" asked Estra, who was struggling through the swamp beside me. "What is *of course*?"

"We're diving!" I replied.

"Pardon?" said Eidep behind me.

"We're diving. The dragon told me he's been watched by booklings. Many times. They always fled when he approached. Successfully, every time. He never caught any of us. There's only one way they could have done it: by diving into this swampy area."

"But we can't dive," said Kloso.

"We can't even swim," Arka added.

"But booklings can dive!" I replied. "I know that from class."

"Yes, the older ones can dive," confirmed Steraph. "We learn it at a certain age, in the Warm Lakes near the Crystal Forest. Under the guidance of experienced divers. But it takes a few days. No one has ever learned to dive in an instant."

"Then we'll just be the first," I replied defiantly.

"I've been diving before," Kloso gasped. "I did it just now."

"You fell into the water," said Estra. "That's not diving."

"Diving is basically the same as falling into water," said Kloso. "It just takes longer."

There was a certain logic to that.

"No," said Elias. "That's called drowning. Diving is swimming

without taking in air."

There was some truth to that, too.

"You dive in clear water," Steraph claimed. "Not in a slimy broth like this."

"Listen!" I cut the debate short. "We have no other choice but to try. We just have to dive until the steam thickens again. The dragon can't blow away the fog of the entire swamp!"

I snatched the scale book from Estra's hands to demonstrate my readiness to make the dive, and tucked our loot under my arm. Nothing motivates a crew like a leader who shoots himself in the foot before marching into battle.

"Just follow me!" I shouted. Then, with a sudden burst of energy, I leaped into the oily water, intoxicated by my own bravery. Having escaped the dragon's mouth, I'd expected to plunge into the swamp, so it felt almost familiar when it actually happened. My mouth stayed closed, but my ears gurgled—and suddenly, I was in another world. My ears had remained open, even letting water in. At least, that's what it felt like, and it wasn't unpleasant. Did this mean that booklings were capable of some kind of gill breathing? Through our ear canals, perhaps? I couldn't dwell on it then, but that's how I explained my comfortable underwater sensation. I heard the others jumping in, one by one.

Once they had all followed me, there was no turning back. I dove deeper and deeper, pushing myself down with powerful strokes. The book in my hand didn't hinder me at all; in fact, it gave me an extra push, like a paddle.

My eyelid didn't close either. On the contrary, it opened as wide as possible without any conscious effort on my part. The glassiness of my eye obviously glowed much brighter underwater than usual, because I could clearly see the focused beam of light passing through the water in front of me. I felt the murky liquid.

The deeper I dove, the clearer the water became and the better I could see, because the heavy dirt particles sank to the bottom, while the lighter suspended particles collected below the surface. In between, the water was almost as clear as spring water.

This was also where most of the animals were found: frogs and tadpoles, small fish, and even jellyfish. Besides undulating seaweed forests and drifting plant debris, there were many books—or rather, the many remains of books. Printed pages drifted past me like schools of fish, detached book covers fluttered like stingray wings. Books were stuck in the mud, their thin bookmarks waving wistfully after me mournful ribbons.

Here and there, spherical fish with luminous bellies swam close, released thick air bubbles in fright when they saw me, and darted into the darkness with flashes of light. I saw snakefish with large, toothy jaws, lurking in decaying piles of books and the skeletons of gigantic fish overgrown with mussels and snail shells. This was a morbid world full of deadly dangers, but there was also beauty: brilliantly glowing jellyfish that drifted gracefully up and down, tadpoles swimming playfully in zigzags, transparent octopuses with colorful suckers, and frantically kicking frogs covered in greenish points of light. The strangeness of everything I saw should have made me want to get back to the surface as quickly as possible, but it didn't. The surroundings felt familiar, almost homely, which was all the more peculiar since this was the first time in my life I had ever been so deep underwater.

In a vast web stretched between reeds sat a glassy underwater spider, its internal organs clearly visible. It watched with many eyes over its prey, which clung in great numbers to the threads: snails, crabs, small sea snakes, tiny crustaceans, and fish, some still alive and engaged in heartbreakingly hopeless escape attempts. The spiderweb itself provided the illumination for the eerie scene, its threads glowing in every imaginable color. The spider must have been

satiated, for it made no attempt to pursue me.

This was a strange world with different laws of nature, where things moved either much slower or much faster. And yet, with every stroke, I felt more at home in this airless dimension with its bizarre inhabitants. My brain repeated the same sentence over and over again, as if on an endless loop:

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

Yes, indeed! I felt like a fish in water, as the proverbial fish in water would say. I became quite exuberant and swam forward with powerful strokes, twisting through the water in elegant pirouettes, skillfully dodging all the books and creatures, and holding my breath as if it were the most natural thing in the world. No, I wasn't even holding my breath—I was breathing water. I had no idea how long this would last, but I also didn't feel like I would need to breathe anytime soon.

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

Suddenly I spotted Kloso beside me, swimming gracefully through a seaweed forest. He seemed to be having the same experience as me, judging by the ecstatic expression on his face. I knew exactly what song was running through his mind:

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

We stared at each other, grinning. Wasn't it fantastic? We could dive! We could *breathe water.* It must have been similar for the Book Dragon when he discovered he could fly. Kloso and I started performing synchronized swimming movements. Diving makes you feel light. Diving makes you acrobatic. You feel like you've been given a new,

better body and have finally gotten rid of your old, worn-out shell. We both entered a state of ecstasy.

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

Booklings can dive.

At that moment—BROOSH!—the dragon's paw slammed down beside us with a sound like a mountain crashing into the water. The shockwave spun me around several times, myriad small and large air bubbles and swirling mud obscured my view of Kloso. This brought me crashing back to reality: we weren't on a carefree dive, but still fleeing an angry giant lizard. Nathaviel had located us underwater, probably by our glowing eyes. He could see us through all that mud—we were shining so brightly! But he'd missed our mark, which showed me that we were probably moving faster than we realized. *Try catching a fish with your bare hands!* I thought.

BROOSH!—that was the next kick, this time so close that I was almost grazed by his enormous foot. Even more powerfully than the first time, I was whirled around my own axis as the shockwave swept me away. Nevertheless, I clutched the scale book tightly to my chest. I was unharmed but completely disoriented. Which way was up, which way was down? The dragon was obviously learning quickly to judge the speed of our movements. His next kick might hit. Was Kloso even still alive? And what about the others? Had the monster already finished them off? I tried several times to close my eye, but I simply couldn't. An instinctive reflex forced me to keep it open. As long as we were underwater, we would be visible to everyone from afar, shining like lighthouses.

There! There was Kloso, swimming beside me again, alive and seemingly unharmed. He looked over at me, gesturing wildly to signal something. I stared intently in the direction his flailing hands were pointing. Yes, there was something at the bottom of the water. Something that, from a distance, looked like… Well, what? Like a

cluster of houses? Like roofs? House roofs? Down here? Was this a sunken village? A residential area of Bookholm, or some city deep within the labyrinth that the Magmass had washed down here? In this crazy swamp, anything seemed possible. But no matter, I understood: whatever it was, it could be a refuge. An underwater hiding place, cover that would block the dragon's view of our telltale eyes.

As we dived closer, we saw that they weren't houses at all, but a few dozen gigantic books, some of them open like roofs in the mud. Yes, that was the largest collection of legendary giant books I had ever seen. They were constantly being found in the catacombs. There were even a few of them in the Leather Grotto, which serves as a dwelling for some of us booklings.

"I remember that," I interrupted the bookling's narrative. I had seen some of these monstrous books not only in the Leather Grotto, but also in the library of the mad giant who lived beneath Shadowhall Castle.

Each and every book was about the size of a one-story house. They were arranged and nested together at the bottom of the swamp lake that they actually gave the impression of rooftops, indeed, of a small sunken village. Kloso swam ahead, dove under one of the book-roofs, and disappeared. I followed him without hesitation, still clutching the scale book tightly.

Under the shelter of the roof, we could finally rest. Despite all the exertion and excitement, I still felt no need to breathe. Kloso seemed to be in the same boat. Did this prove my gill theory? Are booklings amphibians? Well, as long as we could stay here and the dragon didn't see our glowing eyes, I didn't care. Perhaps he'd lose our scent and even interest in us. Right now, he was probably chasing the others; we could still clearly hear his footsteps. But they were farther away now.

BROOSH!

BROOSH!

BROOSH!

All we could do was hope that Nathaviel missed our friends as he had missed us. And that Arka, Eidep, Steraph, Elias, and Estra had become master divers just like Kloso and me. We signaled that we wanted to remain in cover for a while longer. As we did so, we looked around, letting the beams of our glowing eyes scan the surroundings.

Amazing things emerged from the darkness. On the walls of our bizarre dwelling were the same strange symbols as in all the other monumental books I had ever seen. Even we booklings had not yet deciphered these ancient runes, for they bore no resemblance to anything we knew.

Underwater snails and mussels lived here, clinging to the ancient, seemingly impervious pages of the book. Transparent crabs and multi-legged, caterpillar-like creatures drifted back and forth. The whole thing was truly an underwater village! With inhabitants that crawled up the walls or hovered beneath the ceiling. Numerous small, colorful fish, transparent tadpoles, and other creatures previously unknown to me swam busily about, but none of them seemed threatening. They usually became motionless, as if hypnotized, whenever one of our light beams touched them.

The floor beneath the roof of our giant book looked as if it consisted of thousands of fat worms in every shade of green and brown, standing close together in long rows, gently swaying in the water. Instinctively, I knew it was unwise to get too close. Perhaps they were just harmless seaweed or kelp, but one could easily sink into them. I noticed that Kloso was also keeping a respectful distance from these swaying green bulges.

BROOSH!

BROOSH!

BROOSH!

Were the dragon's footsteps receding? Or were they approaching again? It was hard to tell. At the moment, at least, they weren't

directed at us, and we used this opportunity to continue studying the inhabitants of our unusual inn.

Not far from me, a hybrid creature that looked like a cross between a jellyfish and an octopus was performing a playful underwater ballet. It danced up and down, twirled in circles, coquettishly flung up its many arms, inflated its balloon-like body, and then deflated it again, as if trying to attract our attention. And suddenly, with truly astonishing speed, one of the green worms I had mistaken for seaweed shot up from the swampy bottom, transformed into a thin, elastic snake, and seized the octopus-jellyfish. It wrapped itself around it—it was like the octopus-jellyfish was being whipped with a long whip. Then, with a single, violent jerk, the worm dragged it to the bottom, where it disappeared. *Wham!*

Kloso, having also witnessed this chase, exhaled a few bubbles in alarm.

Before we had recovered from the shock, the same thing happened again. This time, it was a small eel that was caught, from where it had been twitching in Kloso's beam of light. Once again, one of the worms shot out of the ground at breathtaking speed, trapped the fish in the middle, and dragged it so quickly into the greenish-brown carpet that I wondered if it had even happened. One look between Kloso and me was enough. This wasn't a safe, welcoming house, but a vicious tourist trap.

We had no idea what kind of creature that might be under the carpet, and we weren't about to go diving to find out. Perhaps it was an animal, perhaps a plant, or something in between flora and fauna. Perhaps it was an organ of the swamp, and the swamp itself a vital offshoot of the magma, detached from its source and established itself down here as a new life form.

Only now did I realize that the seabed had looked like this everywhere during my dive: fat green and brown worms, myriads of them. If all those tentacles were connected, then this would be a being

much larger than the dragon. Much larger, perhaps, than any other creature in the catacombs. An organism of immense size, as big as the swamp itself with its pools and lakes. Yes, perhaps it was a fusion of many different life forms, a community of necessity that had formed an alliance and grown together into a single being, the true ruler of the Orm Swamp.

All these thoughts raced through my mind in a fraction of a second, but they didn't help me. The dragon above, the mysterious swamp creature down here—and Kloso and me right in between. If we surfaced, Nathaviel would catch us. If we stayed hidden, it was only a matter of time before one of its tentacles grabbed us from below, dragged us down, and delivered us to the swamp's digestive system. That is, if we didn't run out of air first.

BROOSH!

BROOSH!

BROOSH!

The dragon hadn't given up the hunt, and the impacts seemed to be drawing closer again. What if he decided to try his luck and trample the Village of Giant Books? Just as I had this unsettling thought, another of the green worms shot out of the ground. It wrapped itself around Kloso's neck with lightning speed and immediately began dragging him to the bottom. I was paralyzed with fear at first, but the creature didn't have as easy a time with Kloso as it had with the small aquatic animals that had been dragged away earlier. Kloso panicked, but he fought back with powerful strokes against being pulled down. I swam to his aid, grabbed the tentacle, and tugged on it, though without much success. It felt like a taut rope being pulled at both ends. With each jerk, Kloso got a little closer to the undulating bottom. Suddenly, a third beam of light cut through the darkness. Another danger? But no—that was, as I realized in the next moment, none other than Arkaneon. Arka! Before I could do anything, he seized the green tentacle choking Kloso with both hands

—and bit into it with gusto! He tugged at it so fiercely with his teeth that I thought I could hear a crunching and squeaking, even underwater. And then the strand burst with a sound like a rope snapping. Twanggg! A multi-voiced gurgling sound rose from the swamp floor, and thousands of green bubbles rose from the shimmering mass. Was that perhaps the equivalent of a cry of pain? Kloso was free.

Arka, with his frantic movements and puffed-out cheeks, gave the impression of a madman, but we understood nonetheless that he was urging us to follow him. He dived ahead with a power and elegance I wouldn't have expected from him or any other bookling. Arkaneon was a far better diver than the ailing Kloso and I; he truly seemed in his element.

Not far from our cover of giant books was the entrance to a long, tube-shaped object, about two arm lengths in diameter, lying on the bottom and disappearing into the darkness. Arka dove inside without a moment's hesitation.

Was it an artificial tunnel? The stem of a petrified giant plant? The proboscis of some unknown creature that would soon greedily suck us in? Under normal circumstances, I would never have ventured in there, but Arka sped ahead of us so fearlessly that we had no choice but to follow.

Arka dove with powerful, even strokes, and we paddled after him as fast as we could. Only once inside the tube did I finally see what it actually was: a very long, slender, hollowed-out stalagmite that had toppled over like a dilapidated chimney. It served as our new cover against the dragon.

The stone tube ended abruptly, but we were back in the open only momentarily before Arka led us into another tunnel. He had obviously discovered a whole network of fallen stalagmites through which we could move without being detected by Nathaviel.

That was good news, but only a temporary solution. We were safe,

but still just swimming around aimlessly. How far did we still have to go? The attacked Kloso didn't look like he'd last much longer. He swam bravely behind us, but the struggle with the tentacle had taken its toll. Even though I was by then convinced that we bookworms possessed an alternative form of respiration, our physical strength was certainly not inexhaustible, even in the watery environment.

At the end of the next stalagmite tunnel, blue light streamed in. It was composed of many small points, each shining with a different level of brightness. Now I began to understand where Arka was leading us. I had already seen this light, once up close and once from afar.

Arka swam resolutely upwards, and we followed him, Kloso with his very last ounce of strength. Finally, we surfaced, panting and gasping.

"Haaaaaaaahhhhh!"

"Hooooooooohhhh!"

"Huuuuaaaahh!"

The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel was the glow of thousands of blue phosphorescent fungi populating a giant stalagmite: this was the landmark where we had arranged to meet, the large dripstone I had passed before. And Estra, Elias, Eidep, and Steraph were already waiting for us there.

Kloso wheezed ashore and vomited noisily. Not far from him stood Eidep, covered head to toe in slimy plant matter and laughing maniacally. Beside him sat Elias, coughing in the mud, eerily illuminated by blue mushrooms.

"You did it," whispered Estra, whose face, like everyone else's, bore the marks of exhaustion. "Thank you, Arka! You're incredible."

A thick blanket of fog lay above us, and I could still hear the dragon rampaging in the distance. I listened anxiously in that direction.

"He's far enough away," said Estra. "He's lost our trail."

"Good heavens!" groaned Steraph. "I can dive."

"No," Estra objected. "Arka can dive. We're just amateurs."

"There are loads of strange creatures down there!" Elias said, as if to himself.

"We saw," wheezed Kloso, who was able to sit up again.

"Luckily, Arka discovered the fallen stalagmites," Estra explained. "They form a real tunnel system at the bottom of the swamp. He led us through there and here. And then he swam back again to look for you. He's a hero."

"He saved Kloso's life," I stated. "And mine, too."

Arka glowed with pride. "In one of the tunnels sat a fat, yellow frog twice my size," he reported. "But my eye light scared it away."

"We could live down there, you know that?" said Steraph. "I could have dived for hours longer. Without coming up for air. I'm a fish."

"You're a frog," I said. "We're amphibians. That's even better. We can live in both worlds."

"I wouldn't want to live in that wet world," Kloso said darkly. "There's something very dangerous at the bottom of the swamp lake. Something slimy, voracious. I never want to go there again. I have no idea what it is, but I have the feeling that this realm belongs to it."

"Do you know what I believe?" Arka asked.

We all looked at him curiously.

"I believe those were bookworms," he said. "Worms that feed on old books. And if they don't have any books to eat, then they eat something else. Booklings, for example."

"Exactly," Kloso agreed. "Those are particularly large and voracious bookworms. A species all their own."

"This simply isn't our world," said Elias. "We don't belong here." "Let's go. We should head back to the Leather Grotto. *That's* our world."

We all nodded and groaned as we got to our feet.

In the distance, I could still hear the dragon, though he no longer

raged and snarled. He seemed to be shouting, uttering articulated words. If I strained, I could even understand his voice.

"He's shouting something!" Elias exclaimed in amazement. "Do you hear that? He can actually speak."

"Be quiet," I commanded. "I want to hear what he has to say." We all became very still and listened intently into the swamp.

"Hey! Little bookworm!" shouted the Book Dragon. "Stop right there! And come back! Yes? Please! I was just joking! I would never eat you. Nor would I bury you upside down! Why would I do that? Can you hear me?"

He was actually talking to me. The dragon was speaking to me personally.

"I simply had to sleep!" cried Nathaviel, his voice now pleading, no longer intimidating at all. "That's the only reason I took you into my mouth. To protect you. Behind my teeth, unfortunately, was the only place in the Orm Swamp where I could guarantee your safety. Do you understand, my friend? Please answer me!"

Estrakos and the others looked at me questioningly. Was the dragon really trying to stop us with *words*?

"Do you hear me, little bookling? I don't want to kill you. I don't want to kill anyone else. That was just to intimidate you! I've completely forgotten how to deal with people. I've forgotten all manners!"

The voice became quieter, but was still clearly understandable.

"But that can be changed! I'm flexible. I'd really like to continue talking to you. Honestly! That felt incredibly good. That was the best conversation I've ever had. Believe me! Can you hear me? Come back! Please!" The dragon panted desperately. "I'm begging you! I could contribute so much to our relationship. You can keep that stupid scale book. It's a gift! And you know what? I'll share my treasure with you. My vocabulary. How about that?" There was a long pause. I thought Nathaviel had given up. But then he started again:

"And I still have to tell you that flawless story I have in my head! You were so eager to hear it. It's truly steeped in Orm. We could write books together! Just imagine! What a duo! Nathaviel and his little bookling. We could turn all of Zamonian literature upside down. We would write books brimming with Orm. And the booklings could print them. Just imagine, my little friend. Just imagine!"

And then, not another word. We heard only the usual sounds of the swamp: the croaking and gurgling, the chirping and buzzing. We looked at each other, nodded silently, and set off. It wasn't hard to decide on a direction: straight away from the dragon's voice.

We trudged forward in single file, me in front, and we didn't talk much, only said: "Careful!"

"Danger!"

"Watch out!"

"This way?"

"No, better this way."

Nothing more was said. Of course, we ran around in circles a few times; of course, we sank up to our hips in the swamp here and there; of course, we had to dodge a few unpleasant-looking creatures. But we reached the tunnel leading to the Leather Grotto without further incident. We were completely unharmed, apart from the fact that in the Orm Swamp, we had lost our youthful innocence.

When we reached the entrance leading to the Crystal Garden, we paused once more to confer.

"Listen," I said. "I have no intention of holding a grudge over your fateful prank, even though I have some reason to! We all nearly got killed."

Relief shone in the eyes of Estra, Elias, Arka, Eidep, Kloso and Steraph.

"But I think we're even now, because we all saved each other's lives, right?"

The others nodded vigorously.

"So the embarrassing part will stay between us. I suggest we say that after class we decided together to do some research for our homework in the Orm Swamp. There, we encountered the dragon and stole a scale book from him. That should suffice. Does that sound believable? I think so. It will make the older booklings feel complicit in our perilous adventure. Perhaps that will reduce the amount of homework we have in the near future."

The others grinned.

I now had my first opportunity to examine the book of scales more closely. It was titled *Knight Hempel* and was written by a certain Gryphius von Odenhobler.

"My conversation with the dragon will remain our secret," I continued. "What I learned from him—well, I must keep that to myself. It's a personal matter. Between us. What was discussed in the Orm Swamp should stay in the Orm Swamp. I owe that to Nathaviel."

The bookworms grumbled in agreement.

"So we're in agreement then?" I asked finally. "Shall we go home?"

"Just a moment!" Estra interjected. "This is a historic moment. We should honor it accordingly."

"Historic?" Kloso asked heavily. "In what way?" He still looked completely exhausted.

Estra cleared his throat. "It may well be that we invented the *League of Ormlings* as a joke. But that doesn't make it a bad idea, does it?"

"No," Eidep replied wearily. "I isn't, actually. But what are you getting at, Estra? Make it short! I want to go to my sleeping cave."

"Well, I propose," Estra began solemnly, "that we found the *League of Ormlings* here and now. A little late perhaps, but not too late."

Everyone was silent. Someone coughed.

"Actually, a good suggestion," Steraph said. "And a good time,

too. Yes, historically significant in a way."

"True," Kloso said. "Now or never."

Arka, Elias, Eidep, and I also nodded. I think we all felt very solemn.

"Good," Estra continued. "And I propose that we make Hildegunst our leader."

A longer pause ensued, which I found somewhat uncomfortable.

"Nothing against that," Eidep broke the silence. "He has proven his leadership qualities. But isn't he a bit too young? And too short? I mean, it's strange to look *down* on a leader. Isn't it? Don't get me wrong, Hildegunst!"

"That will soon change," said Elias. "Booklings grow quickly."

"I'm in favor." That was Kloso.

"Me too," said Eidep.

"Me too," said the others.

"We need an oath," Estra decided.

"That's right," said Elias. "Nothing works without an oath. We need to make a vow secrecy."

"I know one!" cried Estrakos.

We all looked at him curiously.

Estra cleared his throat: "'I know that I know nothing!'" he cried in a trembling voice.

"That's good," praised Kloso, and the others nodded.

I felt very strange when we placed our hands on top of each other with serious expressions.

Then Estra cried out again, with even more pathos: "I know that I know nothing!"

"I know that I know nothing!" we all repeated as one, echoing our new motto.

Then we laughed awkwardly, withdrew our hands, and entered the tunnel to the Leather Grotto.

The Ormlings

Suddenly, like a candle flame blown out by the wind, the light in the bookling's eye went out. His vision cleared, and he collapsed, exhausted.

We both remained silent for a while, deeply moved. Then Hildegunst Two shrugged several times, as if trying to shake off the events he had recounted, and looked at me with a smile.

"Well," he said. "That's pretty much where the story of the Book Dragon, Nathaviel, ends. Or Elivathan, Thanaviel, Levanthia, Ilathevan—whatever you want to call him. Of course, there was aftermath. The older booklings bought our version of events, and no special educational measures were considered or anything like that. The whole thing was embarrassing for the old folks, naturally. They knew all too well that their methods of enlightenment, especially regarding the study of legends, were in dire need of reform.

The entrance from the Leather Grotto to the Orm Swamp was walled up and sealed. The swamp was declared an exclusion zone. Since then, the knowledge and facts about the Book Dragon have been accessible to all booklings of every age—even in written form in our archive. Gryphius von Odenhobler's scale book was sent to

the Book Sanatorium, where its preservation techniques, its Orm content, its chemical and literary effects, and so on, were examined and studied in minute detail. The dragon hadn't boasted. The hide really was something special. Its Orm content was astronomical."

Hildegunst Two looked at me as if his story had ended at that point.

"So?" I asked the bookling. "Did you do it?"

"What? What am I supposed to have done?"

"Come on!" I shouted. "The dragon's offer! Did you go back to the Orm Swamp again?"

Hildegunst Two shrugged. "I've thought about it often," he replied. "Actually, every day, right up until today. But no. Honestly, no! It would be very difficult, anyway. As I said, the entrance to the swamp has been walled up. To find a new way to the dragon, I'd have to find it on my own. It's certainly not impossible, but I haven't dared to try yet."

"So...you believed the dragon?"

"That he meant his speech? The bit about the writing duo and all that? The story brimming with Orm that he still wanted to tell me? Nathaviel and the little bookling and so on? Let's just say: That's something we'd have to find out."

"Come on—you bought it, didn't you? Otherwise you wouldn't be considering it. You're not an adventurer. Not an idiot. Not a mindless bookhunter."

Hildegunst Two nodded. "Yes, you're right. I believe the risk is low. If there are any dangers lurking for me in the Orm Swamp, then the dragon probably isn't one of them. But there are plenty of other reasons to avoid the place."

"And why do you trust him?" I pressed. "You don't know him that well."

"That's hard to say. What the dragon called after me sounded somehow believable. Sincere. Almost...desperate. I think he just

didn't want to be alone anymore."

"Perhaps he's just a good actor. He seems very versatile. Eloquent. Convincing. Unpredictable."

"Yes, I know. There's a certain risk. I could be wrong, and the dragon really just wanted to know what booklings taste like. But that's not a problem. The entrance is sealed."

"And the League of Ormlings? What became of it?"

"Oh, the Ormlings!" said Hildegunst Two. "That's a story in itself. Actually, it's several stories. We've experienced all sorts of things in our capacity as a secret organization. But that's just how it is—secret, you understand?"

"Well, look at that!" I exclaimed, amused. "You were just saying that booklings don't experience much."

Hildegunst Two grinned. "Well, that's true for booklings, but we're talking about *Ormlings* here. We're a completely different story. Actually, an alternative way of life. Ormlings lead multifaceted and adventurous lives, oh yes! But as I said: It's top secret! I've sworn an oath. That's why I can't talk about it." Hildegunst Two shrugged again. "I'm sorry. Silence is golden."

"I understand," I said, and placed my hand on the bookling's shoulder.

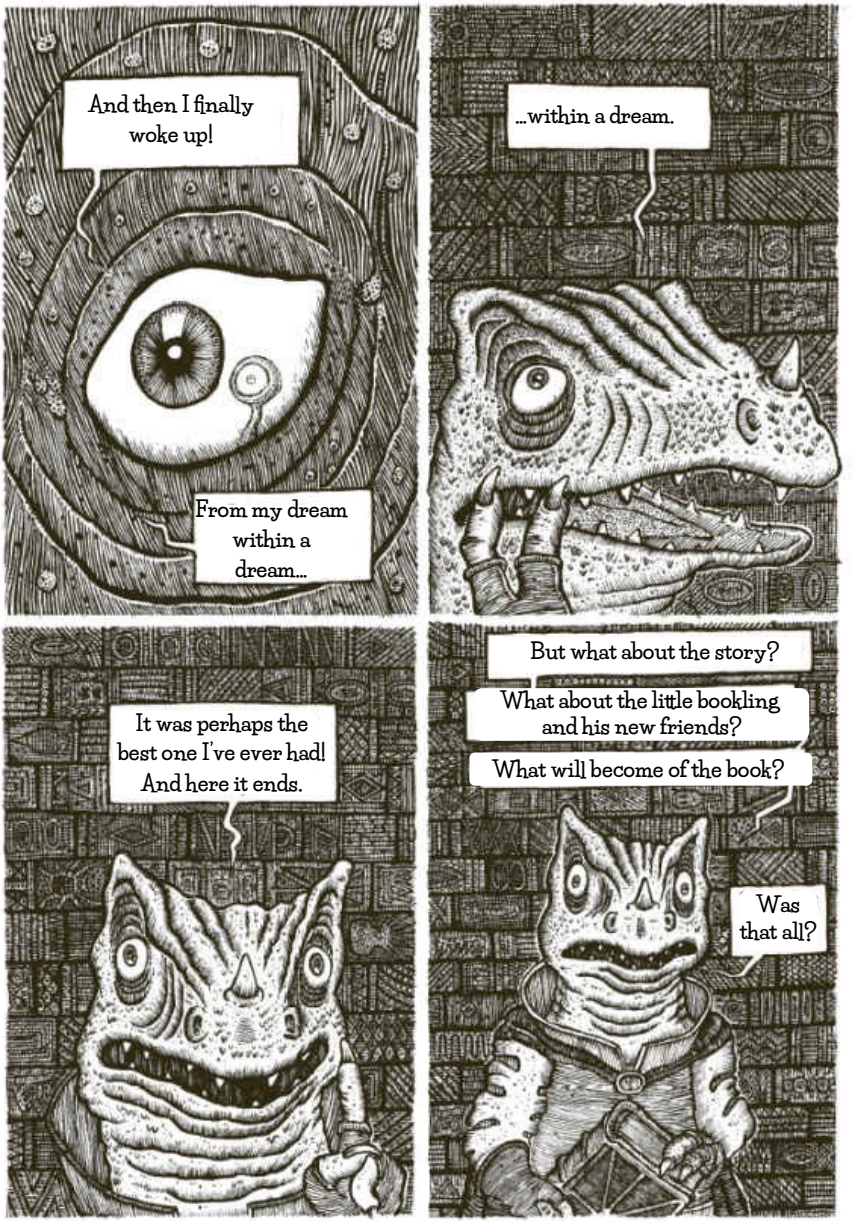
"So?" asked Hildegunst Two, watching intently. "What do you say to my story now?"

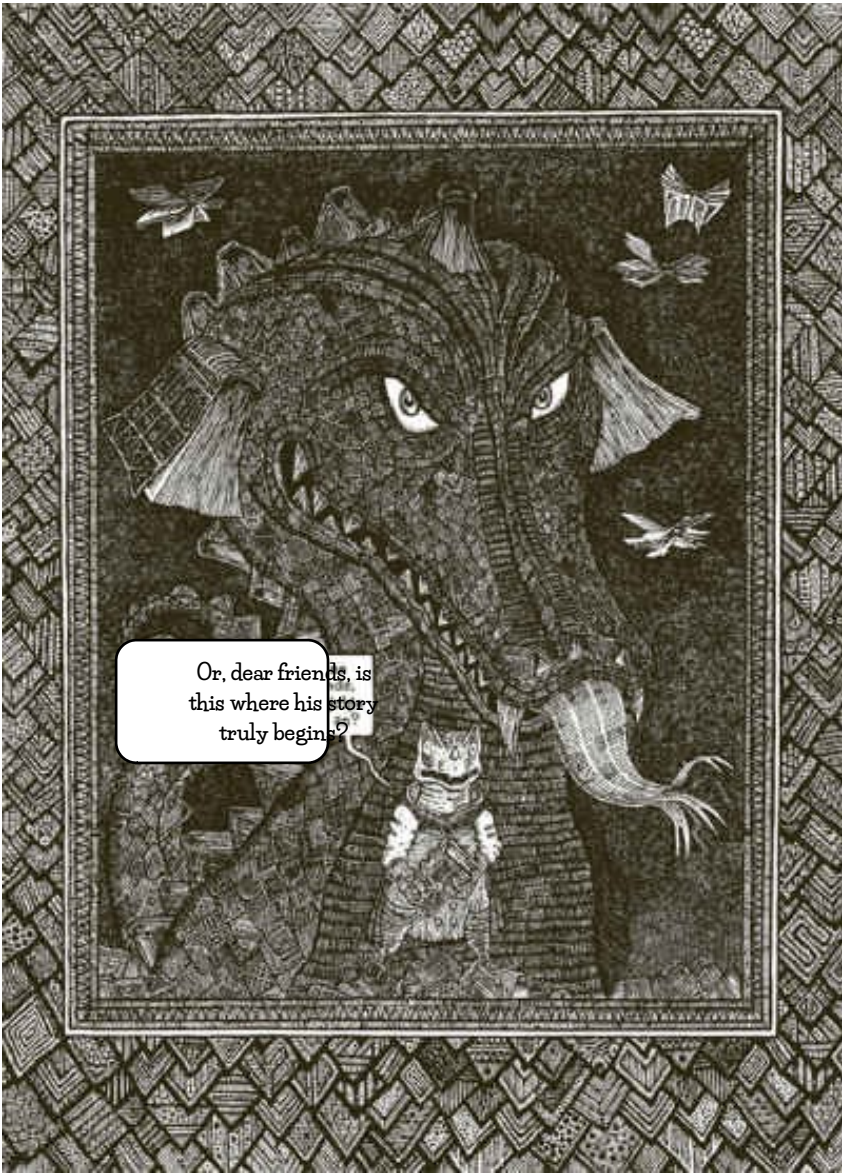
"Well..." I began. "It's great. It has everything a good story needs. You should write it down!"

The bookling thought for a long time.

"You mean," he finally said, "to create a good story, all I have to do is write it down?"

"Yes and no," I replied. "Yes: You should write it down. And no: It's not easy to write a good story. It's the hardest thing of all."


And then I finally woke up!
From my dream within a dream...
...within a dream.
It was perhaps the best one I've ever had! And here it ends.
But what about the story?
What about the little bookling and his new friends?
What will become of the book?
Was that all?


Or, dear friends, is this where his story truly begins?